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**THE HISTORY OF MICHIGAN OPERA THEATRE  
THE FORMATIVE YEARS  
1963-1985**

by

**TIMOTHY PAUL LENTZ**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

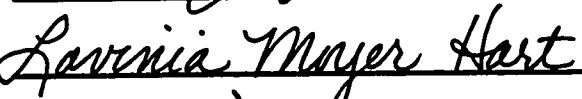
2001

**MAJOR: THEATRE**

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## **DEDICATION**

**To Diana**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

**A work like this is simply not possible without significant contributions from one's family, friends, mentors and colleagues. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the enthusiastic support and encouragement of David DiChiera. It was and is a constant. His positive spirit has guided me in the completion of this work.**

**I would like to thank my committee for their guidance and support. Tony Schmitt, Ray Ferguson, Lavinia Moyer Hart and especially my advisor Blair Anderson have been challenging and positive, and I sincerely appreciate their efforts on my behalf. A special note of appreciation to Ray Ferguson for his cheerful support, keen eye and invaluable contribution proofreading this text. Also from Wayne State, sincere thanks to Philip Fox, Millie Mills and Frances Brockington. Special thanks go to Larry Westley, Diann Flack and Caye Randolph of Rochester Community Schools for their support and encouragement. The MOT family has been receptive and supportive throughout and special appreciation goes to Karen DiChiera, Linda DeMers, Laura Wyss, Brett Batterson, Roberto Mauro, Robert Mesinar, John Kinsora and Mike Hauser.**

**I am very fortunate to have such a wonderful family. I wish everyone could have parents like Rex and Violet Lentz and brothers and**

sisters like Mick and Gail Lentz, Laurie and Rob Davis, Liz and Mike Dolan, Dan Carlson, Stacey Harris and Carol Portice. Their love and support is beyond measure. Finally, I would like to express my deep appreciation for my wife Diana. Her constant enthusiasm, graceful nature, unconditional support and loving heart are what sustain me.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>DEDICATION .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Purpose of the Study .....	1
Limitation of the Study .....	2
Scope of the Study.....	2
<b>CHAPTER I – BACKGROUND – The Detroit Grand Opera Association .....</b>	<b>7</b>
David DiChiera, Founder of Michigan Opera Theatre.....	12
<b>CHAPTER II - THE OVERTURE TO OPERA YEARS The Nomadic Years .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Karen VanderKloot DiChiera.....	24
Overture to Opera.....	28
<b>CHAPTER III - THE EXPANDING SCOPE – One Act Operas .....</b>	<b>46</b>
Full-Length Opera.....	62
Strategies for Regional Opera .....	71
<b>CHAPTER IV - THE MUSIC HALL YEARS BEGIN .....</b>	<b>75</b>
The Music Hall Theatre.....	78
OPERA America .....	97
Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts.....	112
Michigan Opera Theatre .....	115
Executive Director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts....	120

It Can't Be Done.....	125
A Foundation Solidified 1973-74.....	132
Individual Contributions.....	144
Filling A Void.....	149
<b>CHAPTER V - "A TRIUMPH OF REGIONAL OPERA".....</b>	<b>152</b>
Deep Roots.....	156
1974 - A Turning Point.....	167
1975 - The Challenge .....	190
1976 - Rite of Maturation .....	209
The Department of Community Programs .....	223
Seasons of Note 1977 – 1983 .....	227
<b>CHAPTER VI - CONCLUSION – 1983-85.....</b>	<b>284</b>
A Solid Foundation.....	292
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>302</b>
<b>A Chronological List of Productions including Directors and Conductors</b>	
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>313</b>
<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>338</b>
<b>AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT .....</b>	<b>340</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **The Purpose of the Study**

Michigan Opera Theatre as we know it today came into existence in 1973. This was after eleven years of performing as Overture to Opera under the auspices of the Detroit Grand Opera Association. As it approaches its thirty-year anniversary, however, Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) currently has no unified source of information regarding its history and its development. This study provides that unified source of information about an opera company that has grown into a world-class organization. MOT continues to flourish to this day in its permanent home at the beautifully renovated Detroit Opera House. The information that can be gained from a detailed examination of MOT will allow the reader a unique perspective on the establishment of a major cultural institution. This examination of MOT's struggles, challenges and successes not only provides a historical record but also offers other hopeful regional opera companies a critical perspective of its practices and policies. It is the purpose of this study to examine the foundation and establishment of a major regional opera company and gain an understanding of the process of establishing an arts institution.

### **Limitation of the Study**

As a study of Michigan Opera Theatre's formative years this dissertation will trace the development and the history of MOT from its beginnings as Overture to Opera (OTO) in 1963, through the fall of 1985 when the era culminates with MOT's final production in the Music Hall Theatre. 1985 was also the year of the final Metropolitan Opera Week in Detroit after twenty-six years leaving a void that MOT was ready to fill, having earned its status as a nationally recognized, full-time, professional regional opera company. Primary sources for this study include press releases, reviews, administrative documents and program books. Michigan Opera Theatre has an extensive archive presently located in the Detroit Opera House (DOH). In addition, personal interviews with selected founding members, current and past artistic and administrative staff of MOT, as well as interviews with prominent community members of the area, make up a significant part of the research for this dissertation.

### **Scope of the Study**

The significance of Michigan Opera Theatre as a major cultural institution is apparent. Yet apart from a small number of cursory treatments, no in-depth analysis of its organization and development has been undertaken. A detailed examination of MOT's history will allow the

reader a unique perspective in the establishment of a major regional opera company.

This study of MOT is broken down into six chapters. The first chapter will be introductory in nature and among other things will trace the growth and status of opera in Detroit immediately prior to 1961, which was the year of the formation of Overture to Opera as a program of the Detroit Grand Opera Association. This provides an introduction to the atmosphere in the community with regards to opera in Detroit and, indeed, the desire to bring first rate opera to the region. Opera is unique in relation to any other theatrical enterprise in that it requires such tremendous financial backing and support. This has been true throughout opera history. Opera requires not just a leading artistic vision, but also the money and community support to make such an expensive enterprise possible.

Michigan Opera Theatre was the first major arts organization to establish its operation in Detroit after the social unrest of the late 1960s. The activities at MOT and at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts in the early 1970s proved that people would once again come into the city from the suburbs. DiChiera and MOT made an invaluable contribution to the revitalization of Detroit. DiChiera and MOT's arrival at the Music Hall in the fall of 1971 would create momentum and begin a rebirth of Detroit's theatre and entertainment district. A vital part of the district is the Detroit

Opera House, MOT's beautifully restored permanent home that opened in the spring 1996. The momentum began by DiChiera in 1971 was soon picked up at Orchestra Hall by the Save Orchestra Hall Committee and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The momentum continued with the Fox, the State, the Century and the Gem Theatres followed by Second City, Comerica Park and Ford Field. At the turn of the century Detroit had one of the biggest theatre and entertainment districts in the country. The first chapter also includes a relatively detailed look at David DiChiera's background and training. During the formative years the names David DiChiera and Michigan Opera Theatre were essentially synonymous, one and the same. A biographical sense of the company's founder is critical for a complete understanding of what was to develop.

The second chapter begins as DiChiera takes the reigns of Overture to Opera, a program of the Detroit Grand Opera Association originally intended to advertise the group's sponsorship of the annual Metropolitan Opera Tour visit to Detroit's Masonic Temple. The program was intended to educate metropolitan Detroiters about opera by doing programs of scenes from the upcoming operas. In 1963 DiChiera was asked to take charge of the programs. The chapter includes an introduction to Karen VanderKloot DiChiera, whose contribution to the formative years was of fundamental importance. Chapter three details the expanding scope of Overture to Opera activities, including the first one

act and full-length operas. It was during this period that the philosophies and strategies for building a regional opera company would begin to take shape.

In chapter four the Music Hall years begin in the fall of 1971 when the company produces its first season on the Music Hall stage. It is during this time that the company becomes a member of OPERA America, the association of professional opera companies in North America and, in 1973, changes its name to Michigan Opera Theatre. DiChiera actually founded two arts institutions when he moved into the Music Hall and both MOT and the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts must be studied in order to understand the scope of what was taking place.

Chapter five is an examination of the company establishing deep roots in its community. Included are key turning points and milestones as Michigan Opera Theatre becomes a force on the local and national scene. During this time Karen DiChiera founded the department of community programs. It was a time of touring, Opera in Residence and a whole slate of community activities to go along with ever expanding mainstage seasons of note.

In chapter six the formative years come to a close as MOT moves to the Masonic Temple and the Fisher Theatre for its mainstage productions. At the end of the Music Hall years MOT was expanding, growing and in excellent financial health. The formative years in the

history of Michigan Opera Theatre provided a solid foundation on which to build an institution. Establishing a full-time, professional regional opera company, one of the top ten companies in America, was the fundamental achievement of the formative years. DiChiera arrived in his new community at just the right time and it was fertile ground. As it turned out, DiChiera was the perfect man for the job and Michigan Opera Theatre is a tribute to his devoted leadership.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **BACKGROUND**

#### **The Detroit Grand Opera Association**

Building an institution, in this case a world-class opera company, requires a convergence of people and elements as well as a dedicated community, eager to sustain the idea. Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit, Michigan is the result of just such a convergence. David DiChiera, the founder of Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT), arrived at the right time in a community that was fertile ground and, indeed, a convergence took place, one that precipitated the building of a major cultural institution. Together with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) and the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), MOT is today widely considered one of Detroit's three cultural jewels.

In order to trace the very beginnings of MOT and to gain an understanding of the status of opera in the metropolitan Detroit community in the early 1960s when DiChiera arrived at Oakland University, a brief overview of the Detroit Grand Opera Association (DGOA) is relevant. To get a sense of the times, the context in which this story would unfold, and for perspective, it is important to have an introduction to the atmosphere in the community with regards to opera in Detroit and the desire to bring first-rate opera to the region. Opera is, of

course, unique in relation to any other theatrical enterprise in that it requires tremendous financial backing and support. This has been true throughout the history of opera. The elaborate, lavish and therefore expensive nature of what has become known as grand opera requires not just a leading artistic vision, but also the money and community support to make it possible. The objective is to frame the dynamics of the community in which the birth of MOT would take place in the midst of a potential support system that could make it all possible.

The history of the DGOA began in 1943 with a proposal to bring the Philadelphia La Scala Opera Company to Detroit for a week of performances in the spring. Two legendary figures in the history of opera in Detroit, Reuben Ryding and Frank Donovan, gave an excellent insight into the DGOA in essays they wrote for the Met Tour Program books. After eight seasons with Philadelphia, the DGOA changed direction and brought in the New York City Opera. By the end of the 1957 season the DGOA, faced with declining attendance, decided that Detroit had to go out and get the best. It had to be the New York Metropolitan Opera. There was, however, a major problem in that the Cleveland/Metropolitan contract had an exclusivity clause that prevented the appearance of the Met within 300 miles of Cleveland. Frank Donovan moved boldly. Reuben Ryding recalls in his 1968 essay:

If Detroit was to have grand opera, it just had to be the best, it had to be the Metropolitan. The old barriers had to be broken. At the end of the 1957 season President Donovan initiated the first moves with the Metropolitan in a meeting with Anthony Bliss, president of the Metropolitan Opera Association, and Francis Robinson, assistant manager of the Metropolitan Opera, to get action from the Metropolitan management to break down the long standing opposition in Cleveland to Metropolitan Opera seasons in Detroit. The Metropolitan management took prompt action. A delegation headed by Rudolf Bing, general manager, met with key members of the Northern Ohio Opera Association in April, 1958, citing the urgent necessity for the Metropolitan to rearrange its long standing contracts with limiting clauses which closed several cities, including Detroit, to the Metropolitan. (Met Tour Program 1968)

Donovan pressed on. He explained:

The Met had decided to attack the problem boldly and called a press conference for the following morning, at which they wished me to be present. At the press meeting, attended also by Stouffer and Murphy [President and Vice President of NOOA], Bing announced that if the Northern Ohio Opera Association insisted that the Met not perform in Detroit, then it would not perform in Cleveland but would perform instead in Detroit. The conveyance of this news to the eight resisting board members was sufficient to change their minds and it was agreed that the Met could come to Detroit the following year, 1959. (Met Tour Program 1984)

The time was right, Detroit was ready and the opening in May 1959 was a tremendous social and musical event. The following describes the scene on opening night:

This was our night to remember --

With a flash of jewels and top hats — Detroit's most sparkling names — swept up a red carpet at Masonic Auditorium to welcome back the New York Metropolitan Opera after an interim of almost half a century.

Society had planned the fortissimo evening long ago and then carried it off so brilliantly that the Met's Francis Robinson declared: "We've never had a New York opening as impressive as this —." Former tenor of the Met, La Scala, and Chicago Civic Opera, Oscar Colcaire enthused: "Detroit has the most beautiful, the most richly gowned women in the world — and that includes beauties seen at opening of the operas in Rome, Milan, Paris and Vienna!" (Met Tour Program 1984)

The key to unleashing the spirit of the community was Mrs. Anne McDonnell Ford enthusiastically accepting the Chairmanship of the General Committee. Mrs. Ford, along with two Ford public relations employees who were assigned to her by her husband for this project, built a strong organization and, indeed, started a tradition of dedicated involvement that continues today. Donovan gave the credit for the success of the entire venture of bringing the Met to Detroit to Mrs. Ford:

In closing I wish to emphasize that, in my opinion, the principal factor in the establishment of the Association was the work of the then Anne Ford, now Mrs. Deane F. Johnson. During the three years she was Chairman, Met Week was established in accordance with the statement she made on the invitations to 800 women for a meeting in the J. L. Hudson Auditorium. It was: "We mean to make the Metropolitan Opera visits the most important public and social event of our city." Her name, charm, sincerity and hard work did it. (1984)

The DGOA and the Met Tour laid the groundwork for the solidification of a community that would eventually support its own opera

company. The tour was not only an artistic success but perhaps more importantly, a social one as well. In an interview, DiChiera summed it up effectively: "The Met fulfilled a social need, incredible wealth that was looking for a way to express itself" [sic] (DiChiera, 1992).

However, while a critical economic base was forming which included virtually all the important financial resources in metropolitan Detroit (both corporate and individual), the Met Tour was only in town for one week of the year. In October of 1963, Opera News, the official organ of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, ran a very informative article by Ann M. Lingg on the state of opera production in Detroit at the time. In the article Lingg reports:

Since the 4,634-seat [Masonic Temple] auditorium is nearly sold out by subscription, an average of only 13,000 people in this city of two and a half million can hear the Metropolitan. "We have no way of telling how popular opera really is," says manager Henry Ledyard. "So many people couldn't get tickets so many times that they may have stopped trying." Last season about \$25,000 in mail orders had to be returned.  
(Lingg, Opera)

She goes on to further articulate Detroit's conundrum with regards to opera production:

"Detroit is opera-mad," explains Frank Donovan, "not mad at opera, as some people say." He refers to the fifty-one-week operatic void in a city where money and talent abound and practically every suburb has its own orchestra. Opera-lovers regret that young singers from the region, like George Shirley, John Macurdy, Russell Christopher, Shirley Love, Thomas Tipton and

many others, had to leave to make good; and they agree that Detroit could be a great operatic center if local effort had time to take root and to grow to a high level. (Lingg, Opera)

The article continues on to review virtually the entire history, back to 1853, of the efforts to give grand opera a place in Detroit. While several notable attempts were made, none stood the test of time. In 1921 Thaddeus Wronski arrived in Detroit and started what was called the Civic Opera and claimed Detroit's first formal opera season at Orchestra Hall in 1929 (Lingg, Opera). By 1936 Wronski, mired in debt, gave up the struggle. More recently, Kai Rasmussen's Michigan Grand Opera, the Celeste Cole Opera Workshop and Marjorie Gordon's Detroit Opera Theatre (George, Our) all made valiant attempts but fell by the wayside. The Met visits stimulated great interest but the local efforts never got off the ground.

### **David DiChiera, Founder of Michigan Opera Theatre**

The time was right, the community was ready and in the fall of 1962 the right person showed up to lead the way, someone that would coalesce all the forces. On August 3, Michigan State University Oakland, as it was known in those days, announced the appointment of twelve new staff members. Included in the group was twenty-seven year old David

DiChiera and his appointment to the faculty was to be effective August 15, 1962 (MSUO Appoints).

It is important to understand that David DiChiera and MOT are essentially synonymous; their history is completely intertwined, they are indeed virtually one and the same. This premise must be introduced in order to honestly and effectively tell the story. It is one of the primary findings of this dissertation and illuminates the idea that to build an opera company the right person must be found to lead the diverse forces and meld them into a working entity that can achieve the desired goal. In the first era in the company's history it was DiChiera at the helm: impresario. He has been at the heartbeat from the beginning as General Director, involved with every aspect of the company aesthetically and economically, an astute businessman with unparalleled people skills. Even more importantly he has been the visionary, the guiding spirit. At this writing it has been almost a forty-year commitment.

DiChiera was born on April 8, 1935 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania where his musical sensibilities began quite early. "My love affair with opera began when I was only four, back in McKeesport, Pa., where I was born. I heard it on the radio and fell head over heels for it" (George, Detroit's). DiChiera was the youngest of four children and his parents, who were immigrant Italians, moved to Los Angeles when he was ten. His father was a laborer and no one in the family was particularly musical.

"Being the youngest gave me certain opportunities, however. None of the others went to college, and when I wanted a piano, my sister saved her money from her job to buy one, and my mother did housework to pay for the lessons" (Benson, Impresario). He practiced in the garage of their home for two to three hours every night. Along with the practice came his first efforts at composition. He began giving recitals at fourteen and played for various clubs and organizations and while there was never much money involved, it was good experience. "I'm sure my family thought what I was doing was totally impractical. They weren't exposed to music in any depth, nor particularly interested", DiChiera once reflected. "But it was 'my thing' and they let me go ahead with it, even though my brother and sister considered me.... er, unusual" (Skalsky, Dynamo).

He graduated from Canoga Park High School in 1952 as valedictorian and was named all-around outstanding student. In the fall of 1952 he entered UCLA, assisted by a William Farrell Ball piano scholarship. As an underclassman he was awarded a University of California grant, won the Atwater Kent award and graduated in 1956 with highest honors, honorary membership in Phi Beta Kappa and a Bachelor of Arts degree. UCLA was apparently a very good fit and DiChiera stayed for his graduate work. He earned his Master of Arts degree in composition under the direction of Dr. John Vincent after completion of an original piano concerto. During this period he received the annual

Gershwin Award and was on the staff of the University Piano Department. He left for Europe in 1958 after having been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship for study primarily in Italy. At the time he was commissioned by the U.S. Information Service to compose a piano sonata for the Naples Festival of Contemporary Italian and American Music. "The work was broadcast nationally and highly praised by the Italian press for its 'melodic inspiration' and 'vivid harmonic color'" (DiChiera Guest). "I dreamed of performing the great concerti on stage, yet composition started taking up more and more of my time. My style, however, was neo-romantic at a time when neo-romantic was not the acceptable thing to be doing" (Skalsky, Dynamo).

In a letter of inquiry to Stanford University, regarding possible future employment, DiChiera wrote:

The following year was spent in Italy as a Fulbright Grantee where I did research in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Italian opera and performed standard piano literature and my own works in various concerts. Returning to UCLA I have continued my studies in Musicology with Dr. Walter H. Rubsamen. I am completing a series of articles for the German Encyclopedia Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart and in September I shall take part in the Eighth International Congress of Musicology in New York City. My teaching experience includes three years as Teaching Assistant and two summer sessions as Instructor at UCLA. I have taught classes in piano and assisted in history and appreciation courses. I believe that my background in performance, composition and musicology allows flexibility as to possible assignment, and I am especially

interested in a department that permits the development of diverse abilities. (DiChiera, Rhineland)

Having diverse abilities would serve DiChiera very well. It has certainly been one of the primary keys to his success throughout the years. He became fascinated with opera presentation from the producer's viewpoint when he returned to the UCLA faculty following his studies in Italy and got to know Jan Popper who was director of UCLA's opera theatre. "The whole involvement with scores and singers...seeing a great work come alive onstage and understanding how it was done from musical, directional and technical standpoints became something special. It made me respond in a way that nothing had" (Skalsky, Dynamo).

He had completed his dissertation, "The Life and Operas of Gian Francesco De Majo", taken his final examination for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy on July 24, 1962 with Popper as Chairman of his Committee, and accepted his PhD that August. One of the strategies for finding the right job after graduation was using the Lutton Music Personnel Service of Chicago. To summarize his exceptional tenure at UCLA, the following quote from Donn Weiss is from a letter of recommendation he wrote to Charles Lutton:

David is one of the most brilliant students that we have ever had at UCLA. I am certain that my colleagues here will back me up in this. He is a first rate teacher, pianist, composer, and musicologist. His particular specialties are piano teaching, music history and opera. I feel that he could handle any opera workshop situation

**with great musical integrity and insight. It is with great pleasure that I highly recommend him to you. I would appreciate anything that you might personally be able to do for him." (Weiss, Lutton)**

**It was Lutton that put DiChiera and Oakland University together.**

**DiChiera had built an impressive resumé. This was a formidable young man ready for a challenge.**

**In the fall of 1962 he hit the ground running, so to speak, as a young assistant professor at Oakland and as a frequent performer and lecturer in the community. Along with his teaching responsibilities there were many recitals and lectures where the networking began. In fact it was these lectures, recitals and performances that led him into the community and the collective that would become MOT. From its very beginnings MOT was built on the grass roots efforts of a community based program. This is another of the major findings of this study. The long-range success of an institution such as MOT depends upon broad community based support where there is a palpable sense of the pride of ownership, both financially and emotionally.**

**Almost immediately upon his arrival in Michigan DiChiera was interfacing with the community. There was a lecture/performance on American Opera for the Tuesday Musicales of Pontiac and performances at recruiting open houses given by MSUO for local high schools, hosted on campus. Most notable was an eight-week lecture series announced in**

the October 1962 issue of *The Villager*, the newsletter for The Village Women's Club of Bloomfield Hills. He was already being described in glowing terms: "Dr. David DiChiera, musicologist and Assistant Professor of Music at MSUO has outlined an extensive and impressive program for our musically-minded ladies." Further on the article states, "A glance at his biography astounds one with his numerous qualifications," and that "this brilliant pianist, composer and teacher will be ours on Mondays beginning October 8 at 1:00 p.m." (*The Villager*). It must have been a popular series as reservations were required for attendance.

Glowing terms were frequent over the years. There is indeed a certain cachet, a certain charisma about DiChiera. It was perceived right away and is still firmly in place at this writing. In an article entitled "Dynamo with Dash" *Impresario Magazine's* Cindy Skalsky described this unique man:

DiChiera can just as easily be found at a state senate hearing on the arts in Lansing as attending operatic auditions in New York. Or you can see him at a poolside party in Bloomfield Hills as often as in a community center delivering a lecture. Or discussing theory with a music student as negotiating a theatrical contract.

The remarkable part is that in each situation he is perfectly at home, perfectly capable, and (in most instances) perfectly delighted with it all.

Equally well known in upper social circles and in academia, DiChiera buys his clothes in Rome, nibbles daily on several small meals of cheese, bread and gourmet shop goodies and is well acquainted with a respectable number of honest-to-goodness celebrities.

Once described as a "suave ramrod," DiChiera's easy, gracious manner is fortified by an internal discipline that requires him to see all sides of a situation before making decisions and to maintain a schedule that would make physically larger men wilt. (Skalsky, Dynamo)

Always impeccably dressed, charming, knowledgeable, completely comfortable in front of large groups or one to one, his reputation grew quickly. Simply stated DiChiera had, and continues to have, the kind of magnetism that is perhaps the key ingredient in the make-up of an impresario. Many years later Brooks Peters would describe him succinctly in Opera News: "I can see why he's so popular. DiChiera is debonair, with boundless energy and an ability to soothe over-wrought tempers effortlessly" (Peters, Bocelli). As it turned out this would indeed be the man around whom the forces would coalesce.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE OVERTURE TO OPERA YEARS**

#### **The Nomadic Years**

1963 would prove to be a pivotal year for DiChiera both personally and professionally. It would be the year that he would meet Karen VanderKloot and the year he was asked to take over the project known as Overture to Opera, which was the precursor to Michigan Opera Theatre. In the first part of the year DiChiera's activities with Michigan State University Oakland and in the community continued. Performances for the Oakland University - Community Arts Council also continued through the spring and he took part in the Detroit Symphony Orchestra's Educational Series, interviewing world famous opera star Miss Eileen Farrell in a program at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

Responding to the popularity of the Met Tour, Oakland's Division of Continuing Education announced a series beginning in January titled "Operas of the Metropolitan in Detroit." The sessions combined lecture with listening to opera recordings and were focused on preparing for the Met operas scheduled for May. In addition, DiChiera was asked to participate in a program for a special event series, sponsored by the DGOA. The program was called Overture to Opera (OTO) and it was in its second year. He would be a member of the panel that would discuss

*The Barber of Seville*, on March 13, 1963 (Overture, 1963). This would be his first formal contact with OTO and is a key historical milestone.

It is interesting to note the unique historical position *The Barber of Seville* holds in MOT's repertory throughout the years. Tracing the history of this Rossini masterpiece takes one through many important MOT milestones. Besides DiChiera's first contact with the DGOA, *The Barber of Seville* was MOT's first full-length opera in 1970. The 1975 production featured Kathleen Battle's operatic debut and the 1987 and 1993 productions featured legendary Metropolitan Opera baritone Pablo Elvira. Additionally, Elvira sang the famous "Largo al Factotum" from "Barber" as the first aria heard on the stage of the Detroit Opera House during the Gala Opening in 1996. "Barber" has a special place in the through-line of MOT history.

As Chairman of the Detroit Grand Opera Association Volunteer Committee, Mrs. Ford had built a strong organization. By this time the DGOA had developed an extensive education program. The purpose was to develop the interest of colleges and school systems and to find a mechanism to distribute lower priced tickets while generally promoting the Met Tour. The Chairman of the Education Committee, Mrs. Harry L. (Jennie) Jones, organized a slate of diverse activities. There were programs in the local high schools and colleges, exhibits and displays all over town, many radio and television promotions, and several special

events. One of these special events was a series of five monthly programs based on the operas for the upcoming Met Tour repertory. The series was called Overture to Opera; Mrs. Jones thought of the name. The OTO programs included performances of sections of selected operas with narration, followed by a panel discussion moderated by Dr. Roy T. Will, the Chairman of the Department of Music at Wayne State University. The performances featured local artists and were generally well received, but something was missing. Producing these scenes was proving to be quite a challenge. The formula of having cooperating groups, producing the different scenes was turning out to be difficult at best.

DiChiera had caught the attention of Virginia Yntema who was DGOA General Chairman at the time, following Mrs. Ford and Lenore Romney in that post. His expertise, combined with his winning personality, had made quite an impression and it was Mrs. Yntema who suggested he be given the reigns of OTO. DiChiera was indeed named Producer-Director for the 1964 season, Overture to Opera III. In its nine seasons, OTO laid the groundwork, secured the financial support and gained the respectability that allowed for the founding of Michigan Opera Theatre.

DiChiera took OTO and immediately began building an opera company. He looked at it as an opportunity, a chance to build something that would last. He came to Oakland University because he had a sense

that it was indeed fertile ground. During this time period he would continue at OU, his position rising during the next two years to Acting Head of the Music Department, then to Assistant Dean of Continuing Education. His involvement in community programs and lectures expanded and he was, among other achievements, instrumental in the beginnings of the University's major cultural programs, the Meadow Brook Festival and Theatre. It was, however, the building of an opera company that was to hold his primary interest. The DGOA had thought of the OTO program as its educational arm, a promotional vehicle for the Met Tour. DiChiera, on the other hand, saw it as an opportunity to develop something local that belonged to the city. In a 1982 article in the *Ann Arbor News*, he reflected: "Detroit was the fifth largest city in the nation and the only major city without a resident opera company. I couldn't accept that fact; I knew the constituency for it was here but the cultural inferiority is marked. Much, much worse than it is now" (Benson, *Impresario*). He was committed to the idea that the future of opera in America was in the continued growth of regional opera, that it would take a grass roots community wide effort and it would require a large measure of patience and a long range perspective.

### **Karen VanderKloot DiChiera**

It was during the course of all this activity, in 1963, that DiChiera met and courted Karen VanderKloot, the young woman who would become his bride.

I met Karen at a dinner party at Isabel Himelhoch's. Isabel told me I was going to meet a girl who was very talented musically. Karen played one of her own compositions – she's actually far more original than I am – and the first thing I said was, let me hear that middle section again...playing teacher right away, you understand. Karen, naturally, thinks well just who IS this guy? I really must have seemed like an arrogant you-know-what. Fortunately the relationship improved. (Skalsky, Dynamo)

Indeed it did. If one went to central casting and asked for the perfect spouse, friend and partner for this young man who would be impresario, they would have sent Karen VanderKloot. Talented, steeped in a deep sense of community involvement, she was the perfect compliment to the young assistant professor from California. Many years later in the Dedication that he wrote for the Commemorative Program Book for the Gala Opening of the Detroit Opera House he talked about the devotion and support that had sustained him and thanked her publicly saying;

First and foremost has been Karen VanderKloot DiChiera, for 25 years my companion and forever my most faithful friend, critic and counselor. Her contribution to shaping the first decade of activities at the Music Hall and her impact on having MOT touch the

**lives of thousands of children and adults throughout the state is incalculable. (DOH Gala)**

**Two articles from 1956 are noteworthy as they give an insight into Karen's background and upbringing. In one from the Detroit Times titled "Karen Reveals the Musical Magic," the Society Editor notes:**

**Karen VanderKloot is a 14-year-old junior miss with musical magic in her fingertips.**

**Daughter of the Robert VanderKloots of Lone Pine Road, Bloomfield Hills, and granddaughter of one of Detroit's famous citizens, the late William S. Knudsen, Karen tasted the first fruits of acclaim at the Detroit Athletic Club Saturday night.**

**Being a very grown-up hostess to a group of friends was far eclipsed by the thrill she felt when famed orchestra leader, Leo Reisman, played two of her original compositions. Reisman paid this compliment: "She's one of the most charming young ladies I've met, well-poised, modest, polite, with a great drive to amount to something on her own. In my opinion she has intelligence and capacity, and could become one of the world's fine song writers." No wonder Karen, a Kingswood gal, was beaming. (Whitehead, Karen)**

**The other noteworthy article from 1956 is interesting in that it included two pictures, one of Karen who was sponsoring a knitting program for Danish children at the William S. Knudsen Home in Denmark and a second picture showing her mother, Mrs. Robert C. VanderKloot, Chairman of the Royal Danish Ballet Committee, hosting a meeting for a performance that would benefit the National Board of Save the Children Federation in America. The article tells of Karen's involvement in the Save the Children Federation in Rebild, Denmark and how she became**

sponsor of a "knitting group" of Danish ladies because she was interested in the work being done for the needy children. She attended Bloomfield Country Day, the Willow Way Apprentice Theatre Arts School and she is an honors graduate of Bennett College in Millbrook N.Y., where she majored in dramatic arts. She also studied at Wayne State University, Oakland University and the University of Michigan. In New York she studied dancing at the Jose Limon Studios and served as director of alumni relations at Bennett College. She made her debut to New York Society at the Doric Cotillion Ball in 1959 (DiChiera, K., 1996). She is the daughter of Bob and Tuttie VanderKloot who would become great supporters of MOT and would be a constant source of new friends for the opera, including introducing Bob and Nancy Dewar to the MOT Board in 1973.

Karen's talent for composition was further noted in an article from 1963 about the South Oakland Symphony Orchestra's opening of the Birmingham Arts Festival:

Miss VanderKloot, in her Three Children's Dances for Orchestra, displayed, along with a sound sense of orchestration, a genuine gift for tunefulness, charm and wit, commodities which are in rather short supply these days since the demise of Prokofiev and Poulenc. We hope for the opportunity of hearing some of her work in extended form. (Fruehauf, Symphony)

She was talented and had deep roots in the community. It was fortuitous that they would come together and a relationship would bloom. Within a

year and a half of that first meeting they would marry on July 20, 1965 in

Las Vegas and form a life-long partnership:

To be more specific, they eloped, for as Karen DiChiera tells it, her parents were not at all happy with the prospect of their gently reared daughter from a powerful automotive, civic-minded family marrying a struggling Italian musician and academic. "What they didn't understand," says Karen with her hearty infectious laugh, "was that David was an Italian musician with ambition."

"He was annoyingly critical," Karen now recalls of their first encounter. DiChiera called and persisted. Karen dallied and resisted. Finally, a near-fatal automobile accident put her in the hospital for nine months, and she got to know DiChiera better.

With medium length brown hair, little make-up, tailored clothes and sensible shoes, Karen DiChiera looks like the quintessential mature preppie. "But only on the outside, not deep down," she says of the description. "Inside, I was always writing or composing."

"There were frequent board meetings at our house when I was young, interspersed with conversations on how organizations work and how people function. Taking something that is essentially good for people and marketing it was a frequently reoccurring theme." (Benson, Impresario)

This was not only a talented young woman but also one who grew up with a legacy of volunteerism and of giving to the community. She was well suited to the role she would take in the venture of building an opera company. Much later in an interview she explained: "Early on I began to understand how to get into a community and who to put together with whom, and how to mix it up and how to have fun with it" (DiChiera, K., 1996).

The idea of starting an opera company was already percolating. DiChiera was talking about starting an opera company before he was married. Karen DiChiera recounted:

It was going to be opera, always. Then he became chairman of the Music Department at Oakland. When Woody Varner asked David to do this he knew that he was getting the Yntemas, the Townsends, so Ford Motor, Chrysler and GM, my uncle was president of Chevrolet. He had the big three hooked up, so David was a very powerful chairperson of the Music Department. (DiChiera, K., 1996)

It was at this time that Varner released DiChiera to spend one-third of his time on OTO activities.

### **Overture To Opera**

DiChiera's first two seasons with OTO were, as planned, programs of scenes from the operas to be performed by the Met Tour in its annual Detroit season. Typically DiChiera would introduce the opera to the audience and fill them in on relevant opera and music history. It was very much like what Leonard Bernstein was so good at, and popular for, when he addressed the audience in his famous Young People's Concerts. DiChiera was very well received by the audiences and the OTO seasons became very popular. He was determined to make a difference and for the 1964 Season of Overture To Opera III, he doubled the number of performances from the previous year to twelve, which included three

matinees for students. They took place all over the Detroit metropolitan area from Bloomfield Hills to Hamtramck, from Detroit to Trenton. Each location had volunteers in place, as ticket chairpersons. The most extensive education program ever undertaken by the DGOA, it featured four scenes: *Aida* Act II Scene I, *Don Giovanni* Act I Scenes II and III, *La Boheme* Act I Scene II and the final scene from *Faust*. The program was jointly sponsored by the DGOA, Oakland University, University Center for Adult Education (a joint effort by Eastern Michigan University, Wayne State University and University of Michigan) and the Detroit Public Library.

DiChiera assembled what can be considered a stellar local cast and production team. Looking back now one is struck by the assemblage of names during the OTO years. It is a veritable who's who of Detroit area talent. Two interchangeable casts were used. Interchangeable casts would become the standard procedure for OTO. It provided more opportunities for singers and of course, backups were always available and ready in case of emergency. The artists for this first year were Ernestine Nimmons, Maria Roumell, Alice Engram, Rosemarie Murch, Imogene Wiel Bird, Doralene McNelly, Shirley Zaft Benyas, Roma Riddell, Raymond Sharp, Rodney Stenborg, Robert Angus, Thomas W. Cole, and three gentlemen who would be reliable stalwarts throughout the OTO years, Edward Kingins, Cornwell Carrington and Russell Smith. Tom

Aston, who would be a pillar throughout the OTO years, was Lighting Designer and Stage Manager. Aston was a member of the Oakland University Theatre faculty, was General Director at Oakland's Barn Theatre and would design the premiere season at the Meadow Brook Theatre. Christopher Flynn was Stage Director, John Greene was listed for Stage Setting and Costumes and Lawrence LaGore was accompanist and coach (Overture to Opera III). LaGore was considered one of the finest pianists in the area and was well known through innumerable concert, radio and television appearances. The twelve-performance season, which began on January 29, 1964 in Bloomfield Hills and concluded on April 11 in Oak Park, essentially broke even financially. The budget shows total income of \$4,100, with \$3,000 from the DGOA and the rest from ticket sales, and total expenses at \$4,104.32, which included artists' fees, and other miscellaneous items like costume cleaning, music, janitor fees and piano rental.

The opening performance garnered an excellent and supportive review in the Birmingham Eccentric. Excerpts from the review include:

The overture to opera opened in grand style Wednesday evening in the auditorium of Bloomfield Hills High School.

Mrs. Theodore Yntema welcomed the opening night audience with the graciousness that only this year's general chairman generates so beautifully. And recognition should be given to Mrs. Lynn Townsend, Mrs. Ralph Fox and Mrs. Henry Whiting for having such

an eager and receptive audience to launch the overture series.

Dr. David DiChiera, producer-director, who is a vital and extremely talented young man and who teaches at Oakland University, entranced the audience with his subtle, yet humorous and informative quips on the opera vignettes that were presented.

Laurels should go to the staging of Christopher Flynn and John Greene, and to Lawrence LaGore who really kept his fingers flying across the keyboard during the scenes and for the descriptive inserts in the lecture preparations.

If you haven't attended an opera overture, please Go. It's a delightful evening's entertainment, and well worth the effort. (Himmelhoch, Opera)

While the article praised all of the singing and the music in general, it offered constructive criticism about the scenes being in English:

Although this critic realizes the value of having the overtures sung in English (educationally speaking), I missed the true vocal projection of the original language. At times there was an almost comical effect in playing the scene in English that is not intended in the original form, *La Boheme* being a prime example. However, once the ear adjusts itself to the translation, one was quickly swept up in the excitement of the overtures. (Himmelhoch, Opera)

This issue would continue to be a source of discussion and debate throughout the early years up to 1983 and the advent of surtitles. The purists called for the original language and a very good argument can be made since translations are very tricky business. The poetry of the original language is, of course, very difficult to capture. DiChiera's firm strategy however, was to make the scenes accessible, theatrically immediate and in English so the audience would know what was going on:

Some opera lovers feel that the music is the only way to experience opera. In Mozart's operas, the music and its relationship to character and emotions are so complex, that teenage eroticism in Cherubino, or the world-weary melodies of the Countess who has been deeply hurt. Puccini was a total man of the theater, and he would have wanted people to understand that interchange between the young men that opens *La Boheme*. Instead, audiences all wait for the love duet and Mimi. There's always something lost and something gained in translation. (Benson, Impresario)

The idea was to generate a genuine excitement and turn people on to the beauty and power of opera, to create an emotional connection that would last. Later in 1982 DiChiera would reflect on the subject of accessibility:

I think the largest factor is that many companies now are taking works that have always been masterpieces but have dared to make them more interesting and more theatrical and in English. For so long opera was just a stand-up-and-sing musical experience. When you do a *Romeo and Juliet* in which the Juliet looks like she should be doing a Mama Lucia or something, then that has only to do with the music. If that's all there is to opera then people should just listen to it on a recording, get the most famous singers they can find, buy the record and sit there and listen to that music. But that's not what opera is. Opera is a very exciting multi-media experience. It's just like what the rock shows are. What makes rock shows very interesting is that those rock artists know very well it's a total presentation. It's the excitement of their musical style. It's the whole visual image. It's the whole theatrical presentation. Opera has been that since its beginning in 1600 and it's our responsibility that we do it correctly and so that it really communicates to the audience. I think we've just made it more interesting for audiences. (Opera Lover)

Throughout the OTO III season there was tremendous publicity in the local media and these are articles and press releases from the Royal Oak Tribune, The Pontiac Press, The Hamtramck Citizen, The Polish Daily News, among others. The word was definitely spreading, the excitement building. Probably the most notable of these is a full-page spread in the Trenton Times after the final evening performance. Under the headline -- "Trenton, Glitters Gaily for Overture to Opera III" -- is a full-page layout that includes eleven pictures of the reception to honor DiChiera and the cast following the performance. Mrs. Yntema and Mrs. Townsend were in attendance and there was apparently much merriment. With the headline "Town Is Treated to A Taste of Glamour" the article states:

Trenton glittered with all the glamour of opening night at the Met when "Overture to Opera" was presented in the high school auditorium last Wednesday evening.

In spite of an unseasonable snowstorm, the theatre was thronged with eager opera-lovers, who thrilled to the performances, and spirits sparkled during the reception that followed. (Trenton Glitters)

Besides Overture to Opera, DiChiera's teaching responsibilities at Oakland continued, as did the lectures and performances in the community. The MOT archive is full of information and 1964 was a very busy year. In February he was a judge for "Stars of the Future" which was a talent segment on local Detroit television's Milky's Party Time, after

which the president of Twins Pines Farm Dairy wrote a letter of thanks saying, "Your prestige and standing in the community gave added dignity to the contest and undoubtedly added greatly to the feeling of pride enjoyed by all the winners and their parents" (Stewart, DiChiera). In March, there was a lecture at Christ Church Cranbrook on Church Music from the Composers View, a very well received performance of his own Piano Concerto as guest soloist with the South Oakland Symphony, followed by a performance of his own Sacred Cantata for Oakland University's Fine Arts Series. Also in March, in what was called the most important party of the 1964 season at the Bloomfield Open Hunt Club, was a program called "Opera in the City" which he hosted before a black tie dinner dance. In April he hosted a Piano Teachers' Institute, at Oakland, in a program for the Division of Continuing Education on the subject of jazz improvisation. In October was a lecture-performance on "Style in Music" for the Friends of the Franklin Library where the Franklin Forum was already reporting that DiChiera had become known for his popular Overture to Opera series. In December there was a program of twentieth century music with soprano Roma Riddell and Lawrence La Gore as pianist. This program included two of his original art songs; "Time does not bring relief" and "Loving you less than life," which are settings of the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

On January 21, 1965, the Board of Trustees of Michigan State University approved DiChiera's appointment as Assistant Dean of Continuing Education at Oakland University. He was to continue as an Assistant Professor of Music and take the lead in Oakland's commitment to expanding music, dance, theatre and fine arts programs in the community. DiChiera's diverse skills were already being tested. On this strength an opera company was built.

Oakland was able to secure a Mott Foundation Grant to establish the Center for Community Affairs and DiChiera was to direct the cultural enrichment programs that were offered for adults and children. As part of his assignment he was to continue as Producer and Director of Overture to Opera. Overture to Opera III was clearly a success, DiChiera was immersing himself in the metro area sinking deep roots in his new community, and Oakland University was making good on a genuine, forward-thinking position regarding continuing education for which they should be commended.

The 1965 Overture to Opera IV program was expanded to sixteen performances in twelve different communities including Royal Oak, Windsor Ontario, Detroit, Pontiac and Grosse Pointe. The scenes were from *Madame Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *Otello*, *Rigoletto*, Saint-Saens' *Samson and Delilah* and Carlisle Floyd's *Susanna*, two more than the previous year. Tom Aston was Production Manager as well as Scenic and Lighting

Designer on a production staff that had increased to nine people. The cast included Jonathan Swift who would become a long time supporter of MOT. Musician, educator and media personality, Swift later developed a long running, award-winning cable television program for the Bloomfield Community Television. Called "Time Out for Opera," Swift's show has not only been great publicity but is also responsible for a large portion of the MOT video archive.

For the first performance on February 8 the Royal Oak Tribune ran an informative article with a large picture of DiChiera and Roma Riddell in the original Tosca gown, loaned by the Met. In the article DiChiera was quoted:

Last year we played to standing room only audiences throughout the program. We received many letters of appreciation, especially from wives whose husbands had never liked opera, but having heard it in English and understood what it was all about, thought it was wonderful. (Overture to Opera IV)

He went on to say that he found the work very rewarding and "close to my personal conviction that opera deserves its rightful place as real theatre and not just singing in glorified concert" (Overture to Opera IV). Four of the evening's performers were singled out for praise:

Ernestine Nimmons, as Butterfly, and later, as Gilda in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, displayed one of the richest and best controlled voices we have had the pleasure to hear in a long time.

She was a nearly perfect interpreter of the lovelorn Butterfly and equally so of the heartbroken

Gilda who hears her lover make overtures to another woman.

Miss Riddell's prayer before killing Scarpia was exceptionally touching, while Mr. Smith's rich, expressive baritone gave an apt portrayal of sadistic cruelty.

Rosemarie Murch's vibrant mezzo-soprano gave full scope to the sultry seductress, Delilah, in Saint-Saens' *Samson and Delilah*. (De Bono, Overture)

By all accounts the Overture to Opera IV season continued the success, which began the year before. Several of the reviews were summarized in the Met Tour Program book:

Audiences were not the only ones excited by "Overture to Opera IV." Critics and educators expressed their enthusiasm with such comments as these: ". . . fascinated an audience of teenagers . . ." (Immaculate Conception High School). ". . . My students were overflowing with praise . . ." (Northwestern High School). ". . . thoroughly enjoyed the program and gained much in the way of a better understanding of music in general and opera in particular . . .", (students of St. Mary's College). ". . . 'Overture to Opera' is doing perhaps more to promote a genuine interest in Opera in the Detroit and Windsor area than any other single group . . ." (Windsor Star). (Met Tour, 1965)

The academic and the social pace beyond OTO continued to accelerate in 1965 as well. Further cementing his reputation as a composer, DiChiera gave an April 11 concert at Oakland University of his own works. The concert opened with his Lament for Two Pianos performed by DiChiera and Mary Patricia Race; followed by the premiere of Black Beads, three songs on texts by Detroit poet Richard Kubinsky with mezzo soprano Alice Dutcher and DiChiera at the piano; and a

performance of his Piano Sonata. The second part of the concert featured three premieres: the Fantasy for Violin and Piano which brought together DiChiera with violinist Vartan Manoogian who was studying at Julliard and was a noted performer in Europe, Four Sonnets with soprano Roma Riddell accompanied by DiChiera and Psalm Thirteen for a cappella choir conducted by Oakland's Professor George Cripps (Concert of).

"An Evening of Baroque Opera" in which DiChiera conducted a program in a manner similar to the OTO performances took place on May 13 as part of the Baroque Era presented by the DIA. OTO regulars Doralene McNelly, Roma Riddell, Edward Kingins and Russell Smith with Lawrence LaGore on piano performed works by Peri, Lully, Purcell, Blow, Pergolesi, Monteverdi, Scarlatti, Rameau, Handel and Cesti. The evening appears to have been a big success judging from a letter from the director of the University Center for Adult Education who co-sponsored the event: "Congratulations on a job beautifully done. It was a very knowledgeable and tasteful performance for an essentially knowledgeable and tasteful audience" (Holmes, Robert).

Other activities in the spring of 1965 include a Library Workshop Series of four lectures for the Birmingham-Bloomfield Hills Committee for the Metropolitan Opera, appearances at a Tea for the North Oakland Area Opera Education Committee and a poolside party for members of the Met

Tour in Bloomfield Hills. There were also two lecturers as part of a June series at Oakland University to preview the upcoming slate at the Stratford Festival that included *The Marriage of Figaro* and Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny*. Also notable was a performance at a seminar given by the Purchasing Agents' Association of Detroit, a prominent picture of DiChiera and his new wife Karen attending the DSO opening at Ford Auditorium in a spread by the Society Editor in the Detroit News, and a lecture to the Birmingham AAUW on different facets of opera. For the Birmingham Town Hall Lecture Series, DiChiera was asked to introduce Dame Alicia Markova, one of the immortals of the ballet world. Karen DiChiera was featured in the Journal of the Junior League of Birmingham in an article that talked about her busy and interesting life. Among other things the article referred to a weekly radio program of music and informal commentary called "From the Library of Dr. DiChiera" that he was doing for WQRS at the time: "Karen plans and writes his weekly radio program on the arts. On Sunday when the programs are taped in their home, Karen is a gracious hostess serving the participants supper" (Conrad, Delores). In an article titled "The Many Facets of David DiChiera" he spoke about how he loved to compose and wanted time to compose but also wanted to bring music to people. "The exciting part of the Overtures, or of the continuing education programs I am planning – is in exposing

larger and larger groups of people to art forms that can be very rewarding for them" (Many Facets).

Overture to Opera V, the 1966 season was the first break from the formula, the first show of independence in that it was no longer to be just scenes from the Met Tour program. Collins George, music writer for the Detroit Free Press and an enthusiastic supporter, had his finger on the pulse and stated that OTO V had evolved so as to "serve the purpose of being an introduction to opera in general with no relationship to the Metropolitan visit." He reported that the audience that packed the auditorium for the opening performance shows that there "is a hunger to know and to hear opera in Detroit." He gave credit to DiChiera saying that he was "the witty commentator for each scene and was generally responsible for the high level of the performances." Faye Turner, Stella Baumann, Barbara Gibson, Ernestine Nimmons, Carolyn Grimes, Alice Dutcher, Doraleen McNelly Davis, Lee Davis, Russell Smith and Edward Kingins, were the singers, "all of whom deserve credit" (George, OTO Filling). The 1966 Met Tour Program article on OTO made special note regarding Barbara Gibson: "This year's program marks the exciting return of Barbara Gibson to the opera stage after an absence of eight years. Appearing many times on television and radio with Toscanini, Miss Gibson made her professional debut on the Bell Telephone Hour" (Met Tour 1966). Gibson would become Mrs. Sam B. Williams, and a leading

supporter of MOT. She would serve on the MOT board for most of its history and make several key contributions during the formative years.

OTO VI began on February 5, 1966, at the Rackham Auditorium in Detroit, and concluded on April 2 at Oak Park High School. In all there were nineteen performances, including seven specifically designed matinees for students. The program, which was once again accompanied by the distinguished Lawrence LaGore included Act I from *The Marriage of Figaro*, the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor* featuring Miss Gibson, and the final scenes from *Faust* and *Der Rosenkavalier*. The inclusion of "Rosenkavalier" was bold in that it would represent a stretch for the audience to appreciate considering the trouser role of Octavian and the unique nature of this challenging opera. The season, by all accounts was a resounding success, even the student performances. A Detroit News review of the performance at Royal Oak Dondero High School in the Teen News and Views section ran a headline "Swinging Set Hear Opera" and stated that "1000 high school students sat through an hour and a half of opera last week, then applauded long and loud - three curtain calls worth of clapping" (Korona, Swinging).

The pace of the lecture, performance, appearance and social schedule aside from OTO would continue in 1966. In January there was a Detroit Premiere of a film version of "Rosenkavalier" featuring Elizabeth Schwartzkopf at Ford Auditorium sponsored by the Women's Association

of the DSO for which DiChiera served on the Men's Advisory Committee. There was a major concert in March with the Dearborn Symphony Orchestra that featured DiChiera at the piano in a performance of his "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra." Also in March David and Karen DiChiera were featured in a Detroit News article titled "At Home with Young Society" (Butcher, At Home). It is an extensive article recounting their new home, the decorating challenge, the busy schedule, and biographical information on these two rising stars of the social scene. Indeed the DiChieras had purchased a large, older home in Bloomfield Hills. It was the scene of many rehearsals, meetings and company activities. They were also able to play host to artists and friends many times over the years, providing a warm home to stay in rather than a local hotel.

In April DiChiera brought "An Evening of Baroque Opera" back to Oakland University, reprising the performance of the previous year with new repertoire. In May he took part in a program of the Detroit Women's City Club and at the annual Golden Gavel dinner of the Pontiac Federation of Women's Clubs where he spoke on "The Cultural Explosion in Oakland County" and emphasized the theme of grass roots community based support for the arts. He was quoted in the Pontiac Press: "It is provincial to think everything good has to be imported. In this decade increased prosperity has given us time for leisure—unknown to any but the

aristocracy before — and every man can afford culture" (Group Hears). One of Karen DiChiera's projects, "Opera in the County," was recounted in the Birmingham Eccentric's Suburban Scene section with a full-page layout of pictures. It was called "A Day To Remember" as Met Tour cast members and DGOA supporters enjoyed an afternoon at the home of Mrs. Semon E. Knudsen.

In the summer of 1966 the new Meadow Brook School of Music along with the Mott Center for Community Affairs announced a program of study in Opera. This Opera Workshop known as the Opera Institute, directed by DiChiera, was designed to provide training and experience for singers. Special attention was given to stage movement, interpretation of roles and language. The students participated in performances of opera scenes and in a workshop production of Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land*. The principals and the chorus were members of the Opera Institute with Emily Derr in the leading role of Laurie Moss and Leslie Eitzen in the role of Laurie's mother, both with extensive resumé's. Clyde Vinson, director of the Court Theater at Wayne State University was the stage director and the musical coaches included Lawrence LaGore and Naomi Amos. The Meadow Brook Chamber Orchestra was under the direction of William Byrd, of the Musical Performing Arts Association in Flint. Both Amos and Byrd would continue to play important roles in MOT's development. In the fall DiChiera had a return engagement to teach a

series of six classes in American Music for the Birmingham Village Woman's Club and in October he led a program where he interviewed Metropolitan Opera soprano Eileen Farrell for the Women's Association of the DSO.

"Detroit's David, Jousting to Win the Day for Opera" was the headline of an article in the Free Press that fall, and an apt description of the year's activities. DiChiera was quoted:

The National Touring Company of the Metropolitan has proven by its success that an opera well produced but without name singers can sell. Of course, putting on an opera in a school or with foundation support is comparatively easy and safe. But somehow I feel that the general public is most in need. (George, Detroit's)

It is an informative article that ends by stating that DiChiera "has a lot more to do in his fight against Detroit's operatic apathy. But he has the mark of a man who could win" (George, Detroit's).

While it is not the intention of this dissertation to recount every single related activity throughout OTO's history, it is indeed critically important to understand and establish an understanding of the level and the nature of the commitment and the kind of schedule that DiChiera kept throughout the formative years. The next two chapters will go into great detail in order to fully describe this key element because it is a fundamental component. It was this dedication that would prove to be the foundation on which an opera company could be built. As it turns out,

David and Karen DiChiera, as General Director and Director of Community Programs, both still keep this kind of schedule at this writing nearly 40 years later. It is this level of commitment, this kind of dedication to the cause, this labor of love sustained over decades of service that would prove to be the key to success. There was an understanding on the part of both DiChieras of the need for patient, long-term work that would result in deep roots. The goal all along has been institution building, creating a full-time professional regional opera company that would last and stand the test of time. The challenges were great. The primary challenges would be building a financial base during especially difficult times, building an audience and finding a home for the company.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE EXPANDING SCOPE**

#### **One Act Operas**

The momentum and the enthusiasm continued with Overture to Opera VI. Beginning on February 3, 1967, at the Grosse Pointe War Memorial and running through March 29 at the DIA, the season had a total of twenty performances and a dress rehearsal, which were offered in sixteen different locations. There were twelve performances open to the public and nine student matinees. Historically, OTO VI is particularly significant for several reasons. DiChiera had decided that it was time to start doing complete works. Karen DiChiera recalled:

David had decided that he would like to start doing one-act operas, which we were all very excited about. He felt that if he could show that he could do these full-length operas that he could start branching out into bigger things. Phyllis Snow was a very important volunteer in the early years. She came out to Oakland from Grosse Pointe every day and drove everybody nuts, but that's okay. She is one of those devoted volunteers and they are hard to come by, she, her husband Neil, Jim Segadi and Mary Ann Endicott and Ruth Townsend. It was just an amazing group of people that were absolutely devoted to this concept of enlarging these programs and the educational aspect of them. It was like everybody's dream, to put on a one-act opera. (1996)

For the first time OTO VI, in 1967, included a complete one-act opera, Luigi Cherubini's *The Portugese Inn*, which was first performed in Paris in 1789. To add to the excitement this was the Michigan premiere of this appealing comic opera. It was staged by John Broome of the John Fernald Meadow Brook Theatre. Broome came with an extensive resumé, truly a recognized professional. A native of London, England, he had directed operas for Covent Garden and received much acclaim for his direction of Anthony Newley's *Stop The World, I Want To Get Off*. He had taught at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London for eight years and was on the staff of the Academy of Dramatic Art at Oakland University.

It was at this time that the company began to use multi-screen projections for scenic background. These were developed by Dr. Elmer Nagy, who was in charge of the Department of Theatre Arts and Opera at Hartford University at the time. The units were completely portable and allowed for flexibility in handling, fast scene changes, gradual cross fading and other special effects. The system involved rear projections onto large fiberglass screens and were used in combination with traditional stage settings. The Detroit News reported that DiChiera was concerned with "making opera keep up with what was going on." He was also quoted:

It is the wave of the future. But you shouldn't try to make it realistic. The projected images should be stylized because people realize they are seeing screens. Still, you can make them as effective as the traditional settings. For the dream sequence in *The Consul*, for instance, we start with expressionistic people with large eyes in black and white. Then we superimpose splotches of color which we can move around to register the inner involvement of the artists. (Hirsch, Grand)

In still another positive development OTO VI had its costumes designed specifically for that year's production by J. Michael Bloom of Michigan State University. He would be heavily involved throughout the OTO years. In previous years OTO had used costumes that were sent from the Met but they had proved problematical especially with regard to odd sizes and the tattered, dilapidated condition in which they arrived. A multi-talented young man, Bloom not only created the costumes but was also featured as Rodrigo the Host of *The Portuguese Inn*. In addition he directed the program's other two scenes, Act III, Scene I from Verdi's *A Masked Ball* and Act II, Scene 2 from Menotti's *The Consul*. The casts for that year's productions included twenty-one singers from metropolitan Detroit, Ohio and Canada and included a combination of OTO veterans and newcomers. Included in the group were Sue Young and Robert Taylor who were both Metropolitan Audition Regional winners.

DiChiera was quoted in the 1967 Met Tour program on two key areas. First he continued to articulate and further establish his

philosophy that opera should be vital theatre. For this reason the productions were sung in English, which gave the audience a real contact with the drama and a clearer insight into the relationship between words and music. He spoke on a second subject that was another of the primary themes during the formative years, which was the potential for the revitalization of opera in the Detroit area. "If we nurture our own talent, and give them a chance to develop their skills right here, then we can look forward to an exciting development in Detroit musical life" (Met Tour 1967).

The critical response was overwhelmingly positive. With the headline "Overture Is Tops As Cultural Event" the Birmingham Eccentric reported: "This one-act work, *The Portuguese Inn*, was a hilarious climax to a completely satisfying evening" (Wessel, Overture). The Pontiac Press stated that OTO VI, "contributed a new dimension to the growing cultural facilities available in the Pontiac area . . . Fine professional area artists of the highest caliber were brought together . . . the result was high standard performance of opera of three different types and periods" (Rosenthal, Opera). The Met Tour program also included a few excerpts of thank you letters from students who saw the productions in their schools. "*The Portuguese Inn* was very, very good and costumes were good, too. And the end was funny and if you saw it you know what I

mean" (Met Tour 1967). A second quote from a young critic was also notable:

I am a student at Robert Frost Junior High School. I'm in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I am writing about Overture to Opera. In our general music classes we studied opera. When we were able to go see what we studied that was great. I, and all my friends enjoyed Overture to Opera. I thought it was so much fun to go see an opera. I think the opera should be continued. I hope you do.  
(Met Tour 1967)

Clearly the goal of reaching the widest possible audience was starting to come to fruition. Once again Collins George had his finger on the pulse. While he offered constructive criticism and acknowledged that all of the singers weren't of "Met caliber;" that the acting "while better this year was far from the best;" and that the "piano was a poor substitute for an orchestra;" he summarized the situation with the headline "Overture Has A Place In Detroit" saying:

" . . . the verve, the spirit with which everything is presented, the way the company can capture and project a dramatic movement; in general, the high level of competence of the performances make them worthwhile . . . the real lesson of the Overture company is that there is a place in Detroit for an operatic stock company . . . thanks must be expressed to Dr. DiChiera for this awakening to awareness of opera of such a large segment of the population." (George, Overture Shows)

In addition to DiChiera's OTO and Oakland University duties in 1967, mention should be made of his involvement with the AAUW. The American Association of University Women, a well-known and important

civic organization, held their state convention in Detroit in April, and invited DiChiera to speak on the subject "Society's Reflection in the Arts." Continuing as an arts advocate he spoke to the AAUW branches in Muskegon in October and Holland at Hope College in September. This kind of outreach across the state was critical to building the enthusiasm and securing his reputation as a leader in this field. In addition DiChiera was presented with a Certificate of Merit on July 22, 1967 by the Michigan Federation of Music Clubs for his work in their Crusade for Strings.

The DiChiera's first daughter, Lisa Maria, was born on July 3, 1967. She would go on to graduate with her Master of Arts degree in Historic Preservation. One of the chapters of her thesis included a detailed, definitive history of the Capital Theater, now the Detroit Opera House, and was used as resource material for this study. Today she is one of the leaders of MOT Young Professionals, a volunteer support group.

Karen DiChiera's activities continued in 1967 and she continued to solidify the philosophies that would become the heart and soul of MOT's Education and Community Programs departments throughout the company's history. She offered her talents to the Birmingham Public Schools and developed a Music Literature course for elementary schools. It was a comprehensive survey from early baroque to modern-day and, as a volunteer, took her lesson plans to two third-grades at Pierce School

and one at Quarton. The experience was described in an article in the Journal of the Junior League:

Karen represents a person educated in the totalness of learning and the development of the arts in their responses to the world about it. When you make such a complete study of the arts as she has, from the study of their history right up to creating works of art herself, you know what the content is and you have the tools to find answers and to understand questions. In Karen's words printed in Town Hall Magazine, in an article entitled "Children's Records": . . . they (children) find music to be much more fascinating if they understand what happened in the period in which the composer lived. (Denison, Unexpected)

Karen DiChiera was interested in teaching music and its relatedness to all the arts and to history in general, a humanities approach, looking at the whole picture. The philosophies of the current Community Programs Department are clearly an outgrowth of the ones that were set in motion as early as 1967, only on a much grander scale. It has proven to be a very successful approach as "Learning @ the Opera House 2000" gained national recognition at the OPERA America 2000 National Conference. MOT has had award-winning community and outreach programs of this nature throughout the years. The Create-an-Opera Program is a prime example of the philosophy of community programs. In this program the teacher is a facilitator, enabling the students to create an opera from their own experiences. The goal has always been to encourage the students to be active participants, at the

center of the process. This has been a fundamental theme, an eclectic, hands-on, humanities approach to community programs.

The OTO VII season in the spring of 1968 continued the progress. For this season the program included a complete opera, Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*, a tragedy in two acts, a revival of the comic one-act opera from OTO VI *The Portuguese Inn* and Act I from *La Boheme*. Along with six evening performances OTO VII featured fifteen student matinees that were seen by fifteen thousand students (Met Tour 1968) in the inner city and in the suburbs. With the headline declaring "Overture Comes Of Age With Spectacular Medium," the Birmingham Eccentric had high praise:

There is no doubt that the evening belonged to mezzo-soprano Suzanne La Croix, who sang the title role, from the moment she stepped on stage she captured the audience. Miss La Croix is a singing actress par excellence. Naomi Amos, who provided the piano accompaniment, is a brilliant pianist and sensitive accompanist, and it was interesting to hear the difference in her work in the *Boheme* and the *Medium*.

The leads in *Boheme* were sung by Jane Purdy, lyric soprano, as Mimi, and tenor Edward Kingins as Rodolfo. Miss Purdy has a beautiful quality of voice, especially in the upper register, and Kingins is a tenor who is musical, handsome and can act. (Williams, Overture)

Included in the cast of nineteen principal singers was the noted Muriel Greenspon who performed as a guest artist in two performances at the DIA. Greenspon had been selected by Menotti to sing the role of the Mother in *The Consul* in his supervised production for the New York City

Center in 1967 and had gained national attention for her role of Mrs. Begbick in the North American premiere of Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny*, impressive credentials indeed. The two performances in which Greenspon sang Madame Flora in *The Medium* were historical mileposts in that they were OTO's first performances with an orchestra, on March 26 and 27, 1968. These two DIA performances were accompanied by members of the DSO and were conducted by William C. Byrd, from Flint, with whom DiChiera had become acquainted at the Meadow Brook Music Festival.

Once again John Broome was a key artist, directing both *The Medium* and *The Portuguese Inn* and appearing on stage as well, most notably as Toby, the mute, in *The Medium*. Barbara Williams was quoted in the Met Tour Program,

It was a memorable occasion due to the presence on stage of former-Detroiter, Muriel Greenspon and to Emily Derr. Broome had to convey the tender and passionate love he felt for Monica, Madame Flora's daughter, without uttering a sound. He did this exquisitely with body movement and a fantastically expressive face. (Met Tour 1968)

The DAC News was also quoted: "Tom Aston has designed new "rake" sets -- a stage device using floors that slant from back to front. The tenement garret is constructed at acute angles with sharp conflicting lines to heighten the emotional impact of the plot" (Met Tour 1968). Among the many people aiding with the staging was Ray Lindberg who was then

Manager of Michigan Consolidated's Display Division. He helped with lighting, the rear screen projectors, props and other physical aspects of the production.

The steady artistic progress was noted by Jay Carr in the Detroit News. Calling it an "encouraging instance of home-brewed operatic professionalism taking shape in Detroit" he reported:

The Menotti was particularly impressive, theatrically as well as musically. Muriel Greenspon sang Baba and fashioned a characterization notable for its galvanic intensity and tautly controlled vocalism. Emily Derr, the Monica, handled the wistful side of Menotti's music to great effect and John Broome who directed the production, was an accomplished Toby. Uncluttered staging and a resourceful use of slides projected on background screens made for a production as notable for its airiness as the Menotti was for its projection of fantasy and verismo menace. William Byrd, conducting members of the Detroit Symphony, provided flexible and stylistically authoritative orchestral accompaniments. (Carr, Review)

Plato Karayanis, then director of Artist Activities for Affiliate Artist Inc., of New York summarized: "I cannot tell you how much I was impressed with the productions, the singers, and the orchestra. This was in every respect a professional evening, and a city would be proud to have such a company to call its own" (Met, 1968).

Adventurous programming marked the 1969 season, OTO VIII, continuing the format of the previous year by presenting two short, complete works as a double bill. With an eye for something that would

resonate with the times and be theatrically immediate, DiChiera selected *Der Jasager (The Choice)*, a two-act opera by Kurt Weill, directed by John Broome. Adding excitement, this would be the midwest premiere of this challenging piece. Weill wrote *Der Jasager* in Berlin in 1930 with Bertolt Brecht and they explore the idea of voluntary agreement.

Translated literally the title means "The Yes-Sayer." A boy who has joined an expedition through the mountains becomes ill and cannot go on. The choice has to do with whether he should sacrifice himself for the welfare of the group. Posing a morality question, here was a young boy who had to decide between sacrifice for the common good and self-preservation. The boy consents to be sacrificed. The opera offered some timely parallels with what was going on in 1968 politically, in the civil rights movement and the rising protest against the war in Vietnam.

The second half of OTO VIII was the one-act comic opera // *Campanello (The Night Bell)* by Donizetti. Newcomer Robert Cowden directed and provided the English translation. He had an extensive resumé as a director and singer and was, at the time, the head of the graduate opera program at Wayne State University as well as assistant director of the Chautauqua Opera Association in New York. The season consisted of five evening performances for adult audiences and eight daytime presentations for students. With a total of thirty-two singers it was the biggest cast yet, featuring both principal artists and a chorus that

appeared in both operas. Tom Aston designed the sets and an orchestra made up of DSO members was on hand for three of the performances.

The 1969 season was further enhanced by the presence of outstanding operatic star Italo Tajo, as a guest artist. Tajo, cast in the role of the elderly and frustrated bridegroom in *Il Campanello*, was truly an internationally recognized figure in the opera world. At the time Tajo was artist-in-residence and director of the opera workshop at the University of Cincinnati's Conservatory of Music. He was introduced to DiChiera by Barbara Williams, who had sung Rosina to his Don Basilio in *The Barber of Seville* for the San Francisco Opera in 1953. Tajo had performed in opera houses all over the world including La Scala, three seasons with the Metropolitan and nine with the San Francisco Opera. He was the first recognized, world-class artist employed by OTO and his performance at the DIA on February 28, 1969 is certainly a historical milepost.

The reviews were somewhat mixed. In the Detroit News, Jay Carr complimented DiChiera for his "adventurous programming" and stated that the "Donizetti is full of zestful delights and the Weill is grimly striking." He continued:

Robert Cowden staged the Donizetti in a solid, conventional manner. John Broome's staging of the Weill was proficient and stylistically sympathetic, his most striking contribution being a frozen motion tableau depicting the arduousness of the mountain journey with

platforms serving as the peaks. Over the stage hangs the inevitable Brechtian placard. "It is important to know when to say yes," it says. It would seem advantageous to say no, but the boy nobly agrees to sacrifice himself, and does. Russell Smith brought a firm, resonant tone to the role of the teacher who leads the expedition. Conducting was Carl Karapetian, a Detroiter making his first Overture appearance. He seemed overeager. In general he had trouble with balances, occasionally rushed things and disclosed insufficient adjustment to the widely contrasting stylistic demands of each work.

The performances of each had their enjoyable aspect, but overall they fell into that maddening category of being just good enough to make you wish they had been better. It can't be said that they matched last year's standard. (Carr, 2 operas)

In the Free Press, Collins George generally concurred saying that the production "was thoroughly professional in every respect -- singing, acting, direction, stage management, costumes and sets -- yet the two operas of the program lacked the intense dramatic impact of previous offerings" (George, Fine). Both reviewers basically agreed on Italo Tajo with Carr stating that "there was no denying the authority he was able to bring to his assignment" and George reporting that his "thoroughgoing theatrical experience made him easily dominate the stage with his portrayal of the pitiably funny husband."

Perhaps most importantly, it was the reaction of the students who had the opportunity to see the OTO productions that was most telling. A letter to the editor of the Dearborn Press captured the sense of excitement and wonder. It was a sign that the grass roots effort to instill

something meaningful in a new audience was starting to pay dividends.

There was an apparent understanding and appreciation shown by the more than a thousand students who saw and heard the opera.

No group of performers could have wished for a more perceptive and generously appreciative audience. We had caught the magic carpet and for a brief hour and a half had brought an enchanting and new cultural dimension into the lives of these young people. The response of students and teachers was spontaneous and heart warming. (Wagner, Students)

In summary, it was Collins George who sounded the now familiar theme:

The real moral of the evening, however, is what it has been for several years. If a night of such operatic professionalism can be achieved annually by local talent in Detroit, why can't there be a completely successful opera repertory company here? (George, Fine)

Expanding OTO's activities beyond the spring season, the next effort was a holiday production of Gian-Carlo Menotti's short Christmas opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in December of 1969. The first two performances were slated as part of the DSO's Young Peoples Concerts in Ford Auditorium. On December 13, two matinees were presented with the renowned Valter Poole conducting the DSO. Robert Cowden was stage director and once again Tom Aston was Scenic Design and Stage Manager. As always OTO took the production on the road with performances at the Southfield High School Auditorium on December 18

sponsored by the Friends of the Southfield Public Library and St. Paul's Cathedral in Detroit.

Especially notable was the appearance of what was known at the time as the Festival Dancers with choreography by Harriet Berg. Berg is well known throughout the Detroit area. A Wayne State graduate, she directed the WSU Dance Workshop from 1960 - 1964, and had studied under Martha Graham and Jose Limon. At the time she was co-chairman of the Detroit Metropolitan Dance Project and dance coordinator for the Jewish Community Center. The Free Press noticed and reported: "A peasant's dance choreographed by Harriet Berg and expertly performed by Sheila Collins, Hala Lawrence and Jerome Turner provided a welcome interlude of action" (George, Boy). There is of course, a natural connection between opera and dance. There are similar production demands and, more specifically, many operas have ballet or dance sections within them that require a close relationship with the dance community. MOT has been a leading exponent of dance throughout its history. DiChiera's affinity for and encouragement of dance has been one of the impresario's strengths from the very beginning.

Stephen Thomas, a young junior high student from Oak Park was persuaded to audition for *Amahl and the Night Visitors* by his music teacher Dean Amos. Amos, along with singing a role in *Der Jasager* was serving as Assistant to the General Director and Personnel Manager of

OTO at the time. He and his wife Naomi Amos, who was accompanist and Assistant Music Director, were dedicated contributors in the early years. Thomas, according to the Free Press, was the "highlight" of the production, whose "boyish soprano was used very effectively and whose diction was excellent." The review went on to say that:

The set, simple and lovely, was designed by Tom Aston, and the magnificent postcard-bright costumes of the three kings were the work of Michael Bloom. This venture must be considered a new triumph for David DiChiera, the prime mover behind Overture to Opera. (George, Boy)

In the 1968 and 1969 seasons OTO was experiencing much success and the administrative challenges were mounting. It was during this time that professional public relations help was engaged and it was making a difference. Dozens of articles and press releases were being distributed. Radio and television spots and interviews were being produced. It was a very professional effort coordinated by McMaster Associates of Detroit.

The beginnings of what is now known as the Development Department also took place during this time period. Efforts to coordinate fundraising for and underwriting of arts programs were beginning in earnest. An organization known as Affiliate Artists Inc. out of New York City was trying to attend to issues of audience development and finding new combinations of fund sources. Michigan committee members of this

organization at the time included DiChiera, Mrs. Yntema and Barbara Williams. Their efforts to seek out funding from private and public philanthropies, corporations and/or their foundations as well as from generous individuals were groundbreaking. Establishing deep roots in the area of development and fund raising would be one of the keys to the success of the entire venture.

### **Full-Length Opera**

The next step for OTO was a crowning achievement in the first decade. For the 1970 season, OTO IX produced its first full-length opera, Rossini's comic masterpiece *The Barber of Seville*. It was a very important historical milepost and by all accounts it was a tremendous success. Italo Tajo was back, this time as stage director and William Byrd was once again music director. There were nine performances, four of which were student matinees. One performance on April 8 at the DIA was with full orchestra instead of just piano accompaniment. In an important new development the season closed with an April 21 performance in Midland, Michigan, sponsored by the Northwood Institute.

DiChiera put together a most impressive cast. For Rosina he called upon then 19-year-old Detroit, Maria Ewing. It would be her stage debut. She had already attracted attention by winning the 1970 Grinnell Award. The prize, \$2,500, was at the time one of the nation's

most impressive awards. She had made her concert debut at Meadow Brook in 1968 performing in *Rigoletto* with Jan Pierce and Roberta Peters, and at the time she was a protégé of noted Metropolitan opera star Eleanor Steber, studying at the Cleveland Institute on a scholarship.

OTO veteran Elsie Inselman, was cast as Bertha. Also a Detroit, this was the former Fulbright Scholarship winner's fourth season with OTO. Baritone Thomas Palmer was cast in the role of Figaro. This graduate of the Juilliard School of Music in New York had appeared with major symphony orchestras including Chicago and Detroit. He appeared with the San Francisco Spring Opera in 1967 and 1968 and listed television appearances and several recordings among his many credits. He was also the first Affiliate Artist at Oakland University, a post made possible with a grant from the Sears Roebuck Foundation. The Affiliated Artist Program was a nationwide effort aimed at audience building in the performing arts. Along with his "Barber" schedule Palmer was available to sing and lecture before community groups. He spent part of his time in culturally deprived areas of Pontiac and Detroit trying to build audiences among the young. Rounding out the cast were three nationally recognized performers. Tenor Grayson Hirst was Count Almaviva. He had also trained at Julliard and had already made his debut at Carnegie Hall opposite Beverly Sills. Rene Miville, as Don Basilio, was a veteran of Menotti's Spoleto Festival and Sarah Caldwell's Boston Opera Company

and J. B. Davis, as Bartolo, had sung a wide variety of roles with major companies such as the New York City Opera and the Seattle Opera. This was clearly a formidable group and they garnered a very positive series of reviews. The Free Press called the DIA performance with orchestra "completely successful" and stated that: "By now one has come to expect fine entertainment from these Overtures and is never disappointed." The review continued:

Thomas Palmer has a powerful, clear baritone, is a handsome actor and dominated the stage whenever he appeared on it. Maria Ewing proved a marvelous actress as the pert minx, Rosina. She has a creamy smooth mezzo-soprano of surprising power which occasionally she forgets to use, apparently under the delusion that power means loudness. Kudos must also go to Grayson Hirst who was enjoyable as the versatile tenor hero, Count Almaviva. J. B. Davis was cheered by the audience for his portrayal. A special bow must be made to Miss Inselman for the beauty and pathos she put into her one aria in the work.

The real success of the evening however must be traced to Italo Tajo, that wonderful old Metropolitan Opera professional. Not only was there never a static moment in the production but each person was thoroughly trained in even the tiniest bits of stage business. The sets were ingenuously simple. The small pit orchestra was conducted on a high level by William Byrd, of Flint. (George, Overture to)

DiChiera was presented an award before the DIA performance for his contribution to Detroit's cultural life by Mrs. Roman S. Gribbs, wife of the city's mayor. In his review Collins George agreed that DiChiera "fully deserved it" (George, Overture to). The Birmingham Eccentric called

Palmer a "dynamic Figaro" (Kehoe, Palmer) and the Detroit News stated: "Musically, it was a buoyant, graceful, attractive production with fresh, young and agile principal voices, neatly dovetailed ensemble work and close coordination between the pit and stage" (Gill, Cast).

The Pontiac Press reported that "the results were amazing" and that "never has a cast of characters been chosen so well. It is performances like this—complete, finished, artistically of the highest standards, yet full of universal appeal—that make people want to hear opera, and to come back again for more next year" (Rosenthal, Overture). Jay Carr, reporting for Opera News gave kudos to Thomas Palmer and Maria Ewing in an all around supportive review. The Midland Daily News, described the scene at the Central Intermediate Auditorium:

The Midland audience at *The Barber of Seville* was perhaps one of the widest cross-sections assembled here for a cultural or theatrical event. People of all ages, from early elementary school pupils to octogenarians seemed equally to enjoy the performance. Hippies in faded denims mingled with fur - draped matrons and girls in sweaters and skirts sat next to a stylishly dressed blond in formal, beaded evening trousers. (Herring, Barber)

Finally, the Saginaw News reported that the production "had the audience in a lather of near-ecstatic enthusiasm in Midland Tuesday night" and asked, "was there ever a more fetching Rosina than Maria Ewing?" (Henderson, Midland). OTO IX was indeed a resounding success. It was proof that this was a company to be reckoned with. It must also be

considered the springboard to the next chapter where the company would finally find a home after almost a decade on the road. Until a home was secured the activities would continue.

In December of 1970, OTO revived their successful production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Beginning in Roseville on December 6 as part of the Roseville Arts Festival and continuing with performances at Walled Lake and Northville High Schools, the run concluded at Meadow Brook Theatre on December 23. The Pontiac Press reported that Roma Riddell and Russell Smith would be "repeating the roles which brought them acclaim in last seasons production" (Performance of ). 1970 also marked the first of several appearances of Davis Gloff with OTO. After singing in the chorus and taking the minor role of Fiorello in *The Barber of Seville*, he was back for this "Amahl" as part of the chorus. Over the years Gloff has been a notable artist, educator, critic, reporter, radio personality and musical man about town. He has also been, for over 30 years, an enthusiastic supporter of MOT.

Beginning on February 23, 1971, in Wyandotte, OTO's tenth season would be its last one on the road as a nomadic, traveling troupe. There were nineteen scheduled performances and as usual there was a balance of student matinees and evening performances. The season concluded on May 13 with a 9:15 a.m. matinee at the Oak Park High School Auditorium.

"I have had enormous freedom to experiment here." DiChiera reflected in 1982, "There is no reason why we cannot include everything in musical theatre" (Benson, Impresario). Adventurous, eclectic programming had become the norm and would indeed be one of the company's distinctive trademarks throughout its history. For one part of the 1971 season, after a lapse of several years, DiChiera returned to the production of *Scenes*, in English, of operas from the Met Tour. Included were *Werther* from Act III, *Carmen* from Act II and Act IV, Act IV Scene I from *Aida* and Act III Scene I from Offenbach's *La Perichole*. The scenes, which provided a contrast of comedy and drama, were designed by Tom Aston and featured mostly OTO veterans, along with some newcomers.

Two other complete works were also slated for this 1971 season. Donizetti's one-act comic opera *Rita* is a farcical story of a henpecked husband who finally gets the upper hand over his domineering wife, and was directed by OTO veteran J. Michael Bloom and designed by Tom Aston. The third production for this season had to be the most exciting and the most challenging of the program, Menotti's new space-age, multi-media opera *Help, Help, The Globolinks* in its Michigan premiere. It was billed as a new opera "for children and for those who love children" and is the story of the invasion of earth by creatures from outer space who can only be repelled by music. Filled with humor, this fantasy features electronic music to represent the Globolinks and traditional Menotti

melodies that save the world. There was also a heavy emphasis on modern dance with Harriet Berg returning as choreographer. The large cast of eight principles, a children's chorus of nineteen, and six *Globolinks* was directed by John Reid Klein whose credits included Broadway, television and concerts. He had spent three years on the road with the first national tour of *The Sound of Music*, playing Rolf and serving as stage manager and dance captain. Following that he was asked to stage a City Center revival at the request of Richard Rodgers. He had also just completed directing a production of Menotti's *The Medium* at the University of Michigan.

The schedule included two orchestra performances of *Globolinks* on March 27, 1971, at Ford Auditorium with the DSO as part of their Children's Concerts, and a special double-bill with *Rita* on April 8 at the DIA, also with orchestra. For the DIA double bill Mrs. Townsend had, as always, given the extra effort to make sure the house was full by hosting a dinner before the performance with an impressive guest list including Detroit's Mayor Roman Gribbs and the First Lady. The Free Press noted: "The mayor seemed delighted that he was about to be faced with a mythical problem posed by modern opera composer Gian-Carlo Menotti" (Whittaker, How).

Continuing to reach out across the state, OTO was scheduled for one performance with the Kalamazoo Symphony and two performances

with the Grand Rapids Symphony. OTO also returned to Midland for a double-bill that was very well received:

Dr. David DiChiera, we salute you and the Overture to Opera Company, for a production that was top-notch from the set design by Tom Aston to William C. Byrd's musical direction to the last gesture by the talented actors. *Rita* was so delightfully funny, you couldn't help laughing, even though you tried not to for fear of not hearing the next line. (Herring, Two)

The good word was spreading around the state. The Grand Rapids Press found the *Help, Help, The Globolinks* "very convincing."

The review went on:

All of the singing was uniformly good, and the ensemble singing of the children was especially rewarding, since one rarely hears youngsters handle part-singing so well.

In any case, they collectively were one of the most attentive audiences for any musical event of the year. And they also were one of the most appreciative. The end of each scene was quickly and enthusiastically applauded. (Elliott, *Globolinks*)

Referring to the DIA performance, Collins George said that the production was "stylishly produced, employing simple but tasteful settings for both works which are both sung and acted well above average" (George, *Rita*). In the Center Line Community News was an article with a delightful headline quoting a "lanky high school football player" after a performance of the *Scenes*; "I didn't know opera could be so sexy" (Devieu, I Didn't). Finally, under the headline "Young Singers Impressive in Operatic Double Bill," Jay Carr concluded: "Overture has no serious

competition as the troupe likeliest to evolve into Detroit's own full time opera company "(Carr, Young). Indeed they were.

There was one other notable event during this period. On October 22, 1971, a Gala Dedication Concert for the opening of the North Wing of the Detroit Institute of the Arts took place in the DIA Auditorium. The chairman of the event was Virginia Yntema and she called on DiChiera to provide the primary piece of the evening's entertainment. He decided to produce a rarely seen work, Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale* (*L'Histoire du Soldat*) which calls for a narrator, three dancers who speak lines and an instrumental ensemble. The piece is based on the old Russian folk legend of the soldier who sells his soul to the Devil, but while the atmosphere is Russian it has a distinctly universal appeal. It was the powerful, vital nature of *A Soldier's Tale* that drew DiChiera to it. There was, however, another reason for the choice as DiChiera had an ace up his sleeve and cast the Academy Award winning actress Greer Garson as the narrator. He had met Miss Garson the year before at a fund raising event for the Dallas Opera. She was aware what was happening with OTO in Detroit. DiChiera had asked if she would do something for him in Detroit and she said she would. He had planned something for OTO but that changed when Mrs. Yntema called about the Gala. Part of the reason for the choice of *A Soldier's Tale* was that he would be able to use Miss Garson as the narrator and create a terrific public relations buzz.

The fit was perfect and Miss Garson even graciously returned her fee to the Museum as a gift. DiChiera was able to secure the Toronto Dance Theatre for this production. This company was created in the spring of 1968 by Peter Randazzo and David Earle, both disciples of the teachings of Martha Graham. A high-powered group of mostly first chair DSO players, led by Concertmaster Gordon Staples, was the instrumental ensemble. They were conducted by Pierre Hétu, who at that time was the Associate Conductor of the DSO. The production of this powerful, rarely heard work once again demonstrated DiChiera's connections in the arts world and his growing stature as an impresario.

### **Strategies for Regional Opera**

The 1971 season program was the first OTO program that listed an Overture to Opera Committee. This group of thirty-three dedicated individuals led by Committee Co-Chairmen Lynn and Ruth Townsend would soon become the Founding Members of the Board of Directors of Michigan Opera Theatre. Also listed was a much larger group of people, organizations and corporations called the Friends of Overture to Opera. These groups had been formed separate from the DGOA as entities of their own. The financial and personal contributions of these prestigious groups would provide the foundation that would allow for the inception of

**MOT. Mr. and Mrs. Townsend led the way with a love of opera and deep, genuine sense of commitment. DiChiera recalled:**

**The evolution of Michigan Opera Theatre found refuge under the dedicated leadership of Ruth and Lynn Townsend who brought together a group of founding members to provide financial support and loving care for a fragile and young enterprise. It was Lynn whose considerable influence as Chairman of the Board of the Chrysler Corporation opened the doors in the community to pay attention to what he affectionately called "David's Project." He oversaw the transition from Overture to Opera as a touring program of scenes to the establishment of an opera company and the saving of Music Hall as its first home. (DOH Gala)**

**OTO had developed three primary reasons for continuing its operation. In this first decade of activity, the company had enjoyed tremendous success in each of the three areas. First was the goal of creating supportive audiences for opera. Hundreds of thousands of people, adults and students, had been exposed to opera, at minimal prices, both in metropolitan Detroit and across the state. The enthusiasm and the momentum clearly were well established. The second goal was to give local talent a chance to perform in a professional company. One of the main reasons for the failure of professional opera to develop more fully around the country was the lack of opportunities for talented performers. Detroit was an example of a major metropolitan area that had no real professional operatic opportunities. Performers had to go to New York or Europe to find a way into the opera world. OTO had not only**

given opportunities to talented performers but the company had nurtured the talent and allowed it to grow and mature. OTO could truly claim much success with regard to this second goal. The third goal was to bring works that would not otherwise be heard to the community. OTO's programming had shown great diversity and had included four Michigan premieres. Eclectic and adventurous programming had been the rule and OTO had indeed provided a wide range of operatic repertoire including contemporary and classical fare.

The OTO story could help point the way for other communities who would like to see more opera in their local cultural scene. This unique experiment had borne tremendous fruit, not just in the Detroit area but also in a widening geographical sphere. The School Musician, a widely respected professional journal, stated flatly: "If all universities in communities with a population of one hundred thousand or more would develop a similar program as the experiment in Detroit, America could look to a tremendous future for opera in its highest form" (Salute, School).

DiChiera's primary goal all along was to establish a regional opera company. He explained,

It has always disturbed me that so few people in this country really have an opportunity to see opera professionally done. As long as truly high quality performances are limited to New York, San Francisco, Chicago and perhaps a few college campuses, we can't hope to generate much enthusiasm for the art.  
(McMaster, Overture)

DiChiera felt that the future of opera in America was with regional opera companies. He set in motion several philosophies that would provide a foundation for the future, the first of which was to establish broad grass roots, community based support. He felt it was critical to produce opera as vital theatre, and in English, to make it accessible and theatrically immediate. It was also critical to continually strive for artistic integrity by featuring the finest professional work. This would require a dedication to adventurous and diverse programming covering the full range of opera and music theatre. Furthermore, an eclectic, hands-on, humanities approach to education, outreach and community programs would be crucial. DiChiera also believed that he must establish and nurture a firm commitment to dance and address the need to develop a concept of arts advocacy.

To make it all work, to establish in people that palpable sense of the pride of ownership, both emotionally and financially, there had to be a dedicated and devoted leader. That was DiChiera. From the very beginning he immersed himself in the community and created an excitement on which he could build an opera company. It was indeed a labor of love and it was combined with an intense, full time, every single day kind of effort that would inspire the forces around him to coalesce into Michigan Opera Theatre.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **THE MUSIC HALL YEARS BEGIN**

Michigan Opera Theatre as we know it today had its inception in the fall of 1971 with the company's move into the Music Hall Theatre. Overture To Opera had laid the groundwork, a committee that would become MOT's first Board of Trustees had been formed and with the move into the Music Hall there was now a home base from which to work. The pieces had come together and on November 4, 1971, the doors of the Music Hall were opened for a fall season that included three performances of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and later in the month, three performances of Puccini's *La Rondine (The Swallow)*. To add to the excitement, both productions were Michigan premieres of these works.

The Music Hall years began with a clear goal, to establish a permanent, full-time professional opera company in Detroit. In order to put this chapter into context it must be understood that the goal almost immediately became twofold: first to establish an opera company and second to contribute to the renaissance of the city of Detroit. What evolved at the Music Hall was not one but two major arts institutions: a professional opera company and a performing arts center. What

evolved in the larger sense was a world-class theatre and entertainment district.

There was indeed a larger cultural picture. It was a unique and very difficult time in the history of Detroit. The riots in 1967 had torn the city apart. The flight to the suburbs was in full swing and many considered Detroit a "war zone." What had once been a vital and thriving theatre district was almost completely dormant. The Masonic Temple Auditorium and the Fisher Theatre were places where one could attend performances by touring companies. There was also the DIA Auditorium, which is a nice venue but limited in terms of size. In 1970 a Save Orchestra Hall Committee was formed, and while there were no tenants for the building yet, Collins George reported in the Free Press that the committee had "won a reprieve for the building. But its work has hardly begun." He went on to survey the theatre district situation at the time.

The late D. T. Nederlander used to look around him downtown and sigh. "I remember," he would say, "when there were 20 active theaters in this area. Now there are two."

Dave is dead, now, but even before he went those two had gone. The re-establishment of Orchestra Hall should help some, but there are other auditoriums in the downtown area which must be remembered if the center city is to have new life.

There is the old Wilson Theater, now called the Music Hall and for several years also the home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and host to many musical greats, now falling into disuse.

What is to happen to the old movie palaces, like the Michigan and the Fox? Once upon a rather recent

time they were so important to downtown. There is so much to be considered in any attempt at reconstituting downtown. (George, Orchestra)

DiChiera and his committee were fully cognizant of the times and the challenges facing the city and they welcomed the opportunity to make a difference. They were poised to contribute in a way that would help establish a positive identity for the city. It was at this time that the idea of a renaissance in the city was starting to grow and take hold. The Renaissance Center had its ground breaking in 1972. DiChiera and his forces were at the center of it all and he enjoyed the dynamics that were evolving at the Music Hall because he was also, "dealing with the large problems of a city. The civic, political, and cultural aspects of a city have to work together. There's a tremendous thrill in that too" (Skalsky, Dynamo). This twofold goal of establishing a professional regional opera company and contributing to the rebirth of the city provides the key thematic through-line of this study. The cultural impact of Michigan Opera Theatre's leading position in Detroit's reborn theatre district continues right up to the present day at the Detroit Opera House.

An opera company needs a home and reliable surroundings in which to produce. It is also very important to have control of a facility's calendar for the advance planning that is so critical. The DIA Auditorium had proven not to be suitable. It was simply too small, with acoustical

problems that could not be resolved, too many dead spots. Further, the orchestra pit could handle only thirty-eight players, limiting the repertory.

### **The Music Hall Theatre**

OTO Committee member John Griffin introduced DiChiera to Detroit industrialist Mervyn Gaskin in 1971. Mr. Gaskin was the owner of the Music Hall and was looking for a way to use the property. He generously offered the theatre to DiChiera rent-free for what amounted to a trial period. One of the other options for the grand old theatre at the time was demolition, in order to make way for a parking lot. The day after a dessert and coffee meeting at the home of committee co-chairmen Mr. and Mrs. Townsend, on October 26, 1971, the Free Press reported that OTO had found what would be an ideal home base for this chapter in the company's history:

Overture to Opera, the production and education arm of the Detroit Grand Opera Association, will end a 10-year gypsy life when it takes a permanent home this year at the Cinerama Music Hall.

Overture music director Dr. David DiChiera disclosed Monday that an agreement had been reached with Mervyn G. Gaskin, owner of the well-known Detroit landmark, and that two productions will be staged at the hall during November. (Whittaker, Overture)

Without question the Music Hall is an outstanding theatre and it would be an ideal home for the opera company at this point in its history. With 1,800 seats in the house it is not a large venue. It offers an intimate

setting for the audience relative to the stage and it is a beautiful building with excellent acoustics and perfect sight lines. It also has a great, accessible location at the corner of Madison Avenue and Brush Street, conveniently located near Interstate 75. The spark that ignited the rebirth of Detroit's theatre and entertainment district took place in this fine old theatre in the fall of 1971.

Originally called the Wilson Theatre, the Music Hall was built in 1928 by Matilda Dodge Wilson. The widow of auto pioneer John F. Dodge, she had remarried lumber baron Alfred G. Wilson and together they built the magnificent Meadow Brook Hall in Rochester, Michigan. Many of the same craftsmen and artisans who worked on the one-of-a-kind mansion also worked on the theatre downtown. It opened during the depression of 1929 and it was intended to draw the world's performing artists to Detroit. The old Wilson Theatre never had a permanent operator and road shows came and went. The Detroit Symphony took it over briefly in the late 1940s, renaming it Music Hall, and the wide screen of Cinerama had a very successful franchise there in the 1950s. But the symphony moved on, Cinerama's novelty faded and the theatre was left unattended and in disrepair until DiChiera and his budding opera company arrived in 1971.

It was at this time, with the expanding scope of activities and possibilities, that DiChiera announced the appointment of Robert M.

Heuer as the company's first full-time Managing Director. Heuer, a native Detroit, attended Wayne State University where he did extensive work at both Hilberry and Bonstelle Theatres. During his last two years at Wayne he designed and built costumes for the University of Windsor Theatre. He had been Program Coordinator for the Detroit Youth Theatre at the DIA before he came to work for the opera company. When asked about the company's future plans he was quoted in a news release saying he wanted to take "new and bold steps which will not only sustain the traditional opera goer, but also open the doors to opera for those who have never experienced it or even felt they wanted to" (OTO News).

DiChiera had found someone who understood, and believed in this philosophy of reaching out, expanding opera's audience. Considering Heuer's experience, this was clearly someone who understood vital theatre. He would go on to become a key figure in the company's formative years. In the spring of 1975, after a period of incredible growth for the company in the MOT newsletter DiChiera would say: "Bob is like my right arm. He was the best decision I ever made for MOT!" (Take A).

Heuer had arrived only two months before the season and his responsibilities included every area of theatre administration as well as opening a long dormant theatre. The newsletter called it "a baptism of fire into the business of opera for Bob in his first two years with the company" (Take A). In the midst of the first season the all important need to begin

the first fund-raising campaign for the company occupied a large portion of Heuer's time. He also had the major responsibility for the numerous grant proposals and became somewhat of an expert at it, using a four-point plan regarding considerations in the writing of grant proposals. Heuer also conceived several new programs including Opera in Residence and an apprentice program. DiChiera recalled: "Not only does Bob carry out my philosophy and artistic vision for the company, he adds to it with his own creative ideas" (Take A). The newsletter described Heuer:

Soft-spoken, friendly, and very well liked by staff, performers, and patrons alike, Bob is an important and valuable member of the company whose total involvement and sincere dedication have had and continue to have much to do with our success. (Take A)

The world of opera and Bob Heuer were a good fit. His sincere dedication along with considerable talent would lead to a very successful career in opera management. In fact at this writing he is General Director of the Florida Grand Opera, which is the thirteenth largest opera company in America and he has been very active in a leadership role and on the board of OPERA America. His contribution to MOT's formative years and in establishing the Music Hall Center cannot be overstated. In Bob Heuer DiChiera had truly found a winner.

While the formal public relations campaign for the November productions did not appear in the Free Press until October 26, 1971,

plans were well under way early that fall. On Monday, September 13, 1971, DiChiera announced the fall season at a press conference. At that press conference, new Managing Director Heuer announced that auditions for both productions were to be held on September 18 and that the company was looking for principles for "Joseph" and a chorus for "Rondine." There was also to be a children's chorus for "Joseph" which would be directed by Chorus Master Dr. Raynold Allvin of Oakland University. A leading authority in the field of music education at the time, he had been responsible for the successful children's chorus for the previous year's production of *Help, Help The Globolinks!*

*Joseph and The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* would prove to be an ideal choice for the company's first venture in its new home. With its themes of forgiveness and learning to live in harmony it was a perfect and relevant choice in 1971. These were the primary problems in the city at the time and in the finest tradition of theatre, DiChiera was addressing Detroit's greatest challenge from the Music Hall stage. It was also an exciting choice from a marketing and publicity standpoint, and a practical choice because its production values would fit in with the tremendous challenge of reopening a long dormant theatre.

With the move into the Music Hall and the fact that "Joseph" was a Michigan premiere, the excitement was building. From the marketing and publicity standpoint "Joseph" was a great programming choice in that it

would help convey DiChiera's philosophies that opera was the original multi-media entertainment and that the company intended to expose its audience to all forms of music theatre. It was a choice that would reach out beyond the traditional opera audience with a broad appeal to a whole new group. Coming close on the heels of the tremendous success of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's other rock opera, "Joseph" had excellent marketing potential.

"Joseph" was also an opportunity to showcase the wealth of local talent in the area, another of DiChiera's goals. Tom Aston was back as production designer and stage manager and produced a massive white set that would accommodate the large cast and highlight the lighting effects and projections in this multi-media production. The orchestra included legendary Detroit jazz artists Jack Breakensha on percussion and John Trudell on trumpet. Wayne State's newspaper, *The South End*, reported on the notable local cast and reflected on the building enthusiasm:

The performing company lists names such as David Kelly, former star in Detroit's *Hair*, Donald Hayes, a striking performer from *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and *Your Own Thing*; and Michael Jordan and Kai Lanier also from *Your Own Thing*.

I mention these four actors because they're all from Detroit; they're all from Wayne; and they all could make it elsewhere but they've decided to stick with this city. The indication is that people in general have started believing that there's more to Detroit than the UAW and the Big Three. (Reynolds on)

The challenges of mounting the production must have almost seemed secondary compared to the challenges of reopening the long dormant theatre. There were many problems to deal with, but through the concerted efforts of Mr. Gaskin, the City of Detroit, local union leadership, key corporate supporters and especially a tireless, devoted group of volunteers, one by one the problems were dealt with and that first full season took place basically as planned. One of the first tasks was to open the second balcony, which hadn't been used since the 1950s. First, the volunteers tackled the "carpeting," which turned out to be a two-inch layer of dust that had accumulated over the years. They were led by stalwarts Phyllis and Neil Snow, Jim Segadi and Karen DiChiera, who was literally a full time volunteer during those days helping in virtually every area of the company's operation. Among other things the volunteers also scrubbed hallways, walls and the lobby. It was a labor of love:

So DiChiera's opera company moved in. "The volunteers came and rolled up their sleeves and set to work," DiChiera explains. "There was no guarantee that our work -- cleaning and scrubbing and painting -- would ever pay off. We were doing everything on an absolute shoestring."

Some of the stories about the theater's renovation may be apocryphal, but it is the spirit with which they are told that is important -- the kind of spirit that could love an old building and delight in its recycling, a spirit

shared by everyone working at the Music Hall Center.  
(Philp, Detroit's)

Working with a base of 700 subscribers and a humble budget of \$80,000 (Philp, Detroit's), which included administration, performers and scenery, DiChiera had to count on corporate help. It was right at this time, back at City Hall, that the theatre's license, granted many years earlier, expired. In came fire, plumbing, electrical and building inspectors, all with a list of things to be remedied. Converting the wiring from DC to AC on stage to accommodate the amplification system was a major challenge. During the performance of "Joseph" they painfully learned that the old dimmer board system could not be relied upon and there were power failures in the basement that left the cast, including thirty-five children, feeling their way through dressing room corridors to find their way to the stage. As one example of corporate support, the Chrysler Corporation stepped up, looked over the electrical system and helped get it back in shape. It was a very timely contribution.

*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* proved to be an excellent programming choice and not just because it was a new idiom with very relevant themes to explore. Fortuitously, it was also a practical choice considering the condition of the theatre because it would not require a full lighting system or an orchestra pit, as the orchestra was to be on the stage.

"Joseph" has been revised and expanded several times over the years, evolving into a full length musical. The first version, however, was less than an hour long. A curtain raiser, called *The Company Warm-Up* was employed to fill up the evening. The evening received mixed reviews from the critics. Collins George called it "Unamazing" and felt that it was not a great choice because "there just isn't that much substance to it. Further, the company did not give it the careful production one has come to expect from Overture to Opera" (George, *Dreamcoat*).

In the Detroit News Jay Carr put a much more positive spin on the evening's activities. Referring to *The Company Warm-Up* he stated:

Since *Joseph* runs less than an hour, even with the brass prelude, rock dance and jubilation dance that conductor Robert Resseger has added to Webber's music, the four performers offered solo material before *Dreamcoat* went on. Mr. Hayes is an electrifying dancer, and it is well worth sitting through his slick delivery and corny monologue to watch him impersonate Stevie Wonder and James Brown and then cut loose on his own. (Carr, Music)

Carr also referred to the relatively lightweight nature of "Joseph," saying "the temptation is to regard it as a children's oratorio." Overall however, he was positive and supportive:

The production had some good ideas, but not all were realized yesterday, partly because of a balky lighting system which at times left the leads in darkness. As Joseph, David Patrick Kelly projected fey charm, and put just the right amount of self-parody into those of his lines that needed it. A definite singing talent shone

through Michael Jordan's youthful awkwardness as the narrator.

The stationing of the musicians on stage didn't seem to cramp the proceedings at all, and the use of the 35-voice children's chorus was a plus. The performance, if not always precisely co-ordinated [sic], was lively and sunny and easy to take. (Carr, Music)

The challenges of moving into the old theater building continued.

With a full-scale production of *La Rondine* waiting in the wings, it was clear that an auxiliary lighting system would have to be installed. There were several other areas of concern as well. The pit had accumulated about twenty-five years of debris that had to be cleared and the fly system was jammed with a diverse assortment of junk. Clearing the fly house and dealing with an almost hopelessly tangled system of ropes was a tremendous challenge. Sets and lights could not be mounted until years of these theatrical remnants were removed.

Perhaps the biggest adjustment came with the realization that for this production it would not be practical to dismantle the large Cinerama curtain track. All the sets had to be revised. There was no curtain to draw to mask the settings at the beginning of each act or to conceal the set changes that were required. During the intermission the audience got what could be considered a rare treat in that they could watch the stage hands create the make believe right before their eyes, with the scene changes in full view.

DiChiera and Heuer put together a very impressive cast and crew for this first full-fledged opera production in their new home. William Byrd was back as music director and conductor as was Raynold Allvin as chorus master. DiChiera tapped Carolyn Lockwood as director. It was a noteworthy development: "People asked me why I had chosen a woman director. 'Why not?' I said. I had heard a lot of great things about her so strike a blow for women's lib" (Smith, P.S. 1971). Indeed Lockwood came with impressive credentials. She was one of the main creative forces responsible for the development of the critically acclaimed Santa Fe Opera, where she had been a stage director since 1959. She also was director of Santa Fe's Young Artist Program, which had trained many singers including David Hall-Sundquist, who was to sing Ruggero for this production of "Rondine." Lockwood was married to Hans Busch, well-known stage director for the Metropolitan Opera.

In the lead role of Magda was Nancy Shade, a member of the New York City Opera. Onita Sanders sang Lizette. Sanders, a native Detroiter, was a member of Detroit's Celeste Cole Opera Theatre, and a frequent soloist in the DSO's Rackham series. This versatile artist played a critical part in both of the first productions as she had just played the harp in the "Joseph" orchestra. The cast also included Overture stalwarts Charles Roe, Jan Albright, Nancy Hoover and Elsie Inselman.

Every effort was given to making *La Rondine* a full-fledged production. DiChiera asked twenty-two year old Dayvid Warda to do the costumes. Warda was a costume major at Wayne State's Hilberry Theatre at the time and was about to receive Wayne's first costume design degree the following June. Working on a very limited budget, this young man built fifty turn of the century costumes to give the production a notable boost aesthetically. In the Detroit News Jay Carr reported that Warda had "designed some lovely costumes." Indeed Carr's review was generally supportive, calling the production "charming." While it was clear that Carr felt that *La Rondine* was one of Puccini's lesser operas, he wrote:

The Overture to Opera production of "La Rondine" last night at the Music Hall exerted considerable warmth and appeal. Miss Shade, a tall striking redhead, was at her best in the duets with her lover, Ruggero. The production really took wing in the second act, a café scene right out of "La Boheme," and the lovers' duet sung by Miss Shade and David Hall-Sundquist accounted for a considerable part of the atmosphere.

Charles Roe, as the man who was keeping Magda, made some solid contributions. Onita Sanders, as the maid, didn't have a single aria but she projected appropriate soubrette pertness. The trio of Parisian lovelies portrayed by Jan Albright, Nancy Hoover and Elsie Inselman provided almost the sole bright spot in the first act. In the pit, William Byrd often disclosed a tender sympathy for Puccini's idiom. (Carr, "Rondine")

The main social event surrounding the opera took place on the first Friday, which was opening night. Support for the opera was part of what

had to be one of the biggest evenings of the social season. During the 1971 Detroit Auto Show, an event called "From Cars To Caruso" was sponsored by the Mayor and Mrs. Roman Gibbs and Mr. and Mrs. John C. Griffin. The event must have been a hit.

Merry-makers invaded the inner-city from all points inner and outer. They went from cocktails at the DAC, to cars at Cobo, on to Music Hall and then backed up a bit to the Harmonie Club. The Robert VanderKloot clan took over as pipers to whose tunes the crowd danced: Mrs. Robert (Tootie) VanderKloot masterminded the preview party with Douglas Dalglish, head of the Detroit Auto Dealers' and of the actual show. Over at the Music Hall, David DiChiera did his thing with an "Overture to Opera" performance of "La Rondine."

And before anyone could cry "Uncle," Hizzoner Mayor Roman Gibbs of Detroit and Mrs. Gibbs lured a crowd over to historic Harmonie Club for an afterglow. Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs with Gov. and Mrs. William Milliken were honorary sponsors of the auto preview, and heads of the four leading car manufacturers and their wives led the active sponsor's list. (Pringle, Wheels)

This was a social event of enormous importance, evidence that DiChiera was continuing to nurture viable, vital patronage and that a solid connection to the city's key group of supporters was continuing to solidify. The VanderKloot's contribution to the support base for the opera company was and indeed still is, at this writing, a contribution that is almost beyond measure. For literally the entire history of the company they have taken a leading role in introducing new supporters to the company. Perhaps even more importantly they have helped to nurture an enthusiasm that has made support for the company not only a righteous and honorable thing

to do but also an enjoyable, rewarding thing as well. There is a genuine sense of ownership and pride among the supporters of this company. This sense of ownership is without question one of the fundamental strengths on which the company's success has been built.

In order for an opera company to be formed and to exist, two primary objectives must be achieved. Aesthetics and business must merge in the perfect way. DiChiera would have to produce a first class, eclectic artistic product and he would have to solidify a financial base from which to work. Clearly he was well on his way. Securing a home at the Music Hall, producing a successful mainstage fall season of "Joseph" and "Rondine" and being a major part of the event "From Cars to Caruso" were all evidence that the building enthusiasm was justified.

Plans were already underway for a second fall season at the Music Hall. The success of the 1971 Fall Season established a tradition that continues to the present. The 1972 Fall Season would continue under the same temporary arrangement with Mr. Gaskin regarding the use of the Music Hall. While there would be no mainstage production until fall, there was a great deal of important activity that took place throughout 1972, activities which kept DiChiera and his opera company in the public eye and in the mainstream of local and national arts leadership.

The first major event of 1972 was another collaboration with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Back in September of 1971, DiChiera

confirmed an agreement to be part of the DSO's Young People Concerts once again, with a full staging of Gustav Holst's one-act opera *The Perfect Fool*. Two performances were scheduled for February 26 at Ford Auditorium, with the DSO under the direction of Pierre Hétu. The work is presented as a fairy tale with the fantasy conjured up by a wizard with spirits of fire, earth and water. It is at the same time a sophisticated satire on opera with spoofs on the Italian and Wagnerian traditions. At the time it was billed incorrectly as an American premiere; it turned out that it had been performed in Kansas in the early 1960s. It was indeed a Michigan premiere, the sixth premiere the company had produced to this date. DiChiera continued to make good on the pledge to bring new works to the area's opera going public.

One of the reasons for doing *The Perfect Fool* was that DiChiera would be able to collaborate with Christopher Flynn and his Ballet Company for the ballet sequences. The Christopher Ballet Company, based in Rochester, Michigan, was a notable ensemble at the time in close proximity to Oakland University. They had an excellent reputation in the local dance scene. Along with being the choreographer, Mr. Flynn was also cast in the title role as the Fool.

Giving local artists opportunities had always been a goal and in *The Perfect Fool* local talent was shown at its finest. Along with Flynn, DiChiera once again tapped Tom Aston to stage direct and design. The

talented Dayvid Warda was back to design and execute the costumes. A large cast of over sixty principles, chorus and dancers was assembled and collectively they earned perhaps the company's most notable review to date. Getting an excellent review in *Opera News* has always been an achievement of the first order for any opera company and *The Perfect Fool* earned just such a national notice. Calling it "one of the most stylish stagings the company has given," and praising Tom Aston for realizing the "spirit" of the work and for holding "the principals, chorus and dancers in smooth traffic patterns," the notice was a great boost for the company:

Dayvid Warda's costumes invoked a sort of once-removed William Morris medievalism. Since heavy amplification was used, not much can be said of the singing, though Richard Conrad contributed a stylish cameo as the Troubadour who sings a parody of the drinking song from *Traviata*. He and the Traveler, Carroll Strickland, managed their Rossini-like repartee smartly. Betsy Roe made an attractive Princess, and Davis Gloff as the Wizard managed not to frighten the children while still being imposing. Christopher Flynn, who mimed the role of the Fool, provided the smoothly choreographed and danced ballet sequences. (Carr, *Opera News*)

The program for *The Perfect Fool* was the first time the name Roman Terleckyj was listed in conjunction with the company. This marks the official beginning of a long and dedicated tenure of service that continues to this day. He was a music student at Oakland University and met DiChiera when he got involved in the Opera Workshop at Oakland University in 1970. He simply fell in love with opera and decided to stay

with it. "I ran away with the opera," he would say later in an interview. Terleckyj's association with the opera world turned out to be a career choice. He is now, at this writing, an internationally recognized stage director and arts administrator. The early 1970s were busy and exciting times for Terleckyj. He became completely involved with the company and its activities, everything from singing in the chorus, managing the chorus, taking some minor roles, doing props and cleaning bathrooms:

I did everything, it was a great way of getting involved. It was this incredible thing that was unfolding and I happened to be part of it. It was Bob Heuer, it was Phyllis Snow, David and myself. It was basically those four who were on a day to day basis at the Music Hall. Of course, Karen was also very much involved at that time. (Terleckyj, 1997)

He continued his dedicated involvement, moved into administration, eventually started to serve as assistant director, and maintained a heavy involvement in the company's activities touring around the state. He became one of the company's most trusted and reliable colleagues, returning time and again to participate at key times in history.

The company continued its activities through the year in 1972. There was a successful school tour of Donizetti's *Rita* in March. The OTO Chorus and members of the company (Edward Kingins, Jan Albright and Gabriel Balassone) had the opportunity to perform at the Meadow Brook Festival in August with the DSO and Martina Arroyo in a concert version of *Aida*.

During the summer the Chrysler Corporation made it possible for the company to build its own sets and make costumes by donating a warehouse in Highland Park for the company to use. The opera company followed up by putting out a call in the local media for donations to help equip the new workshop. Making it clear that it was not an appeal for money, they specified that they were looking for sewing machines, power tools, irons, saws, dress forms, drills, furniture, old clothes, drapes and material. Tax statements were made available for donors who wanted to take tax deductions.

Phyllis and Neil Snow continued their dedicated volunteer efforts. They exemplified the best of what volunteerism can and should be about. In a lovely feature article about them in the Grosse Pointe News they were called DiChiera's "greatest fans." Their feeling was heartfelt: "it's really very selfish. We're both involved in something we both love" (Mueller, Pointer). Phyllis was essentially a full-time volunteer working in the office, selling tickets, chauffeuring artists and doing a whole host of jobs. Along with many others they handled a myriad of problems and assignments such as adapting the building that Chrysler had donated.

When Chrysler offered an empty building, Pine Engineering, for Overture to do with what it would, Neil got on the phone and alerted his corps of men volunteers, who trucked sets from temporary storage facilities, (the barn at Oakland University, the DiChiera's basement, the Music Hall), consolidating them in one central location.

Then the men settled down to cleaning the place up. Cleaned up, it's perfect for Overture's purposes, with offices for designers, costume workrooms, an area for laying out flats, lots of storage space, a roll-up front door wide enough to get a truck through. The trucking in and cleaning up took a lot of time. (Mueller, Pointer)

The opera company simply would not have happened without this type of heartfelt volunteerism.

There were other notable events in the areas of development and public relations. The Business Committee for the Arts produced a poster titled "Art is for Man's Sake." There was great hope building for the development of the arts and a direct connection to the business and corporate community would be critical. Also, an Opera Party was planned by the OTO Committee to take place at The Latin Quarter on October 16, 1972 as a benefit for the company. Mrs. Avern Cohn and Mrs. Sam Williams were selected as the co-chairmen. The evening was billed as, "A zany fun-filled evening – Spectacular Italian buffet – Fabulous singing waiters – Famous Celebrities – Great Movies – Exotic Fun" (OTO, 1972). This party was the first of a series of events that would evolve into the Annual Opera Ball. Evidently it was a spirited evening and an excellent fundraiser. Finally, maintaining his high profile in the community, DiChiera participated as a judge for the Oakland County Association for Retarded Children's Michigan Special Talent Show and as

an on-air personality for Detroit Public Television's Art Auction. Both events took place in November, during the middle of the fall season.

In the Education/Community Programs Department the activities continued to reach future opera patrons at the most fundamental level, in the elementary schools. The program Karen DiChiera started in 1967, "Awareness through Music" had grown and was now being taught, as part of the regular music classes, not only in Birmingham but in Bloomfield Hills, West Bloomfield and Pontiac as well. The program was being revamped into a two-year project and the big push in the fall of 1972 was to find more volunteers to teach the program that took place in conjunction with the regular classroom teacher's activities. The entire program was geared to humanize music and was now being called AIDE; Assistance in Developing Education. The idea was to provide enrichment programs that the schools could not otherwise afford. OTO's education department continued to have an important impact not just in inspiring young people but also as a public relations vehicle that naturally drew attention to the company's activities.

### **OPERA America**

A truly significant moment in the company's history occurred in March of 1972. It was at this time that DiChiera's company, still formally known as the Detroit Grand Opera Association's Overture to Opera

Company was officially accepted as a member of OPERA America, the national association of professional opera companies. This is significant in that OTO was now officially in the national mainstream of the opera world. In larger terms it is also most significant in that it gives perspective to the stature, rank and the influence DiChiera's company was achieving relative to the overall history of the regional opera company movement in North America in the last quarter of the twentieth century. The company's association with OPERA America over the years clearly shows DiChiera as a leader in the regional opera movement at a critical juncture in the growth of OPERA America. DiChiera has maintained a heavy involvement in OPERA America throughout his career, including serving as President for two terms in the 1980s. He was in the middle of the action as the organization galvanized the philosophies and practices that have defined its existence.

The Information Service Research Coordinator at OPERA America provided some data that puts MOT and DiChiera's stature into perspective (Cecchetti, Betsy). OPERA America was formed in 1970 with seventeen charter member companies, all in the United States and Canada. OTO was the thirty-sixth member elected. In 1976 there were forty-four members, all in North America. The tremendous growth of the organization continued at a strong pace. In 1985 there were ninety-six members, including two outside North America and in 1996 there were

143 company members, twenty of which were from outside North America. Members enjoy many benefits and this organization has clearly brought the opera community together for its mutual benefit. OPERA America holds annual auditions and has grants-in-aid for young singers. They have also developed regional cooperatives for physical scenery where members can loan their sets to other companies, sometimes rent-free. This has been a tremendous asset, financially, to companies around the world. OPERA America also initiated internship programs to provide experience and instruction for young professionals in non-singing fields such as stage direction, management, lighting and costuming.

OPERA America's growth and influence are intertwined with the growth of the regional opera movement during the last quarter of the twentieth century. During DiChiera's tenure as president the organization more than doubled in size. The company's involvement over the years is the single most illuminating barometer of the stature and the influence DiChiera and his opera company have had in the national and international opera community. DiChiera's involvement in OPERA America would increase in the years to come.

As 1972 progressed, plans for the second fall season at the Music Hall were well under way. The Eccentric Newspapers ran an informative article in August with the headline, "Townsend's host 140 to plan opera."

**Mrs. Donald (Pauline) Young, Chairman of the Season Ticket Committee, summarized the sentiment and the goal of this meeting:**

**"The real excitement," said Pauline Young, "is to bring out 140 women on a hot summer day . . . all highly enthusiastic . . . to establish Detroit regional opera, similar to San Francisco, Washington and Houston." In exuberant tones Mrs. Young noted, "Some of the reasons to support Overture is [sic] because you love good music and desire to have more opera in Detroit." (Hitch, Townsends)**

**With the Townsends in the lead once again, the commitment to bring opera to Detroit was clearly evident with the OTO committee truly representing a force to be reckoned with. Twenty-seven team ticket captains who each received an instructional kit of materials represented different areas of metropolitan Detroit. DiChiera was on hand to give an overview of the upcoming season and encourage the troops.**

**The eagerly anticipated 1972 Fall Season at the Music Hall was by all accounts a tremendous success. "Already there was a marked increase in the number of people who knew what was happening," DiChiera recalled (Philp, Detroit's). He was focused on the company's primary philosophies of having the operas sung in English, casting with singers who looked the parts they sang and making the operas vital theatre as well as music. He had been able to increase the budget to about \$150,000 (Philp, Detroit's) but was still in the precarious position of "borrowing" the theatre without any firm assurance about the future. The**

season opened on September 28, 1972 with Mozart's *Così Fan Tutti*, followed by Puccini's *Tosca* beginning on October 27 and concluded with a double bill of Menotti's *The Medium* and *The Telephone*, beginning on December 7. Each production had three evening performances and one matinee spread over two weekends. The repertoire clearly reflected DiChiera's philosophy of bringing an eclectic slate to his audience.

"The Overture to Opera's production in English of Mozart's comic opera *Così Fan Tutti*, the company's first offering of the season, is a complete success" (George, Overture's). Indeed, the reviews and the response in general were very positive. For this "Cosi" DiChiera relied almost entirely on stalwarts of his company. William C. Byrd was back to conduct a chamber sized contingent of his Flint Symphony Orchestra. Also returning as stage director was J. Michael Bloom. He was on tour with a national touring company of the musical *Promises, Promises* at the time but, eager to return and work with DiChiera, he made room in his schedule for the two and a half week intensive rehearsal schedule. Dayvid Warda now a fixture in the costume department, and with a costume shop up and running in the warehouse, was on board to design and execute the costumes for all three productions that fall. The cast was made up of veterans Doralene Davis, Barbara Windham, Charles Roe, Richard Conrad and Roma Riddell as Despina. One newcomer was cast to sing the role of Don Alfonzo. DiChiera contracted John Ostendorf of

the Metropolitan Opera Studio. This bass-baritone had impressive credentials including performing with the Houston Grand Opera and at Carnegie Hall. When it came time for the performances, however, Ostendorf became ill and could not go on. To deal with this crisis DiChiera called on Zeiotes Edmund Toliver, a young University of Michigan voice student, to save the day:

Toliver, looking more like a basketball player than an actor-singer (he is 6'7"), had less than a day's notice to prepare the role. He was telephoned at his Ann Arbor home only the night before to replace the suddenly ill John Astendorf [sic] of New York, who was originally scheduled for the part. Toliver, who has sung Don Alfonso before, carried it off perfectly. (George, Overture's)

The Detroit News also reviewed the production favorably. In his review Jay Carr touched on the running debate regarding English language productions. He suggested that it would be "idle to pretend" that the English translation "plumbed the depths of Mozart's Music." While this is certainly true to a certain extent, DiChiera was holding fast to the philosophy that whatever the translation loses to the trained operatic observer, it gains in theatrical impact, especially when playing to audiences that are not acquainted with opera. The following excerpts from Carr's review give a good sense of the positive impact this "Cosi" must have had:

Credit for the overall tone of amiability above all belongs to conductor William Byrd... Dayvid Warda's

costumes captured the flavor of 18<sup>th</sup> century sumptuousness...As Fiordiligi and Dorabella, Doralene Davis and Barbara Windham brought a ravishing tonal glow to their first duet. As the saucy Despina, Roma Riddell provided a seasoned professionalism which extended to her impersonations of doctor and notary, each of which was a comic cameo complete with different accents. (Carr, Opera, dance)

For the second opera, *Tosca*, DiChiera continued to expand his horizons in two very important ways. The company was able to secure a grant from The National Endowment for the Arts that would allow them to take *Tosca* on the road for performances in Kalamazoo and in Flint, along with the performances at the Music Hall. Secondly, DiChiera was able to contract nationally and internationally recognized talent, which gave the production an extra measure of excitement and prestige.

In the title role of Floria Tosca was world-renowned soprano Phyllis Curtin. She was an internationally recognized presence of the first order. After her debut with the New York City Opera she had gone on to leading roles with the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala and the Vienna State Opera. She was also a favorite with composers and many works had been written especially for her, including the prize-winning opera *Susanna* by Carlisle Floyd. Curtin's presence had a big impact on the audience and the opera staff. Recalling artistic highlights, Roman Terleckyj described the power of this world-class soprano: "I go back to *Tosca* with Phyllis Curtin, her performance was so powerful. That was the

day my eyes opened up to the communication in music; what it meant to be able to sing and communicate at the same time" (Terleckyj, 1997).

Slated for the role of Cavaradossi was American tenor Charles Hindsley. He was somewhat familiar to the Detroit audience after his appearance in the past summer's Meadow Brook Festival of *Aida* as Rhadames opposite Martina Arroyo. After his studies at Juilliard he became a regular with the New York City Opera. For Baron Scarpia DiChiera brought in Ronald Holgate. He was not only a trained operatic baritone but also an accomplished actor who won a Tony Award for his role in *1776*. Alternating with Mr. Holgate was the young baritone Michael Ingham, a product of the Indiana University Opera. He was on the music faculty of the University of California, Santa Barbara at the time. Brenda Sinka was on hand to relieve Miss Curtin at the matinee performances. She also was a product of the Indiana University Opera and had just finished singing the lead role in *La Traviata* in Grand Rapids. Carolyn Lockwood of the Santa Fe Opera was back as stage director, as was William C. Byrd as conductor and a chorus of OTO regulars was in place to fill out the cast.

It was quite a schedule. Rehearsals began on October 12, 1972 and one week later the set was moved to Flint in time for one dress rehearsal and an October 21 performance at Whiting Auditorium sponsored by the Flint Institute of Music, with the Flint Orchestra. After

that the company packed up and moved back to the Music Hall and with one brush up rehearsal, opened the Detroit run on October 27, also with the Flint Symphony. Following the Detroit performances they packed up again and moved the production to Kalamazoo for one dress rehearsal and a November 14 performance at Western Michigan University's Miller Auditorium as guests of the Kalamazoo Symphony Society. This performance was with the Kalamazoo Symphony Orchestra with Music Director and Conductor Pierre Hétu on the podium. Hétu had positions with both the Kalamazoo Symphony and the DSO at the time and, as a colleague of DiChiera's was in a good position to help make the excursion to Miller Auditorium a successful venture.

It seems as though every production of *Tosca* has some glitch or problem that crops up. Many people consider *Tosca* to be jinxed. Throughout its history productions of this opera have been haunted by one problem or another. From its very first production at Teatro Costanzi, in Rome on January 14, 1900, problems and mishaps have plagued *Tosca*, and this production was no exception. It was called "The Great Percussion Instrument Disaster" in a story in the Grosse Pointe News (Mueller, Pointer). During the process of moving the production and the orchestra back to Detroit from Flint the van transporting the tympani broke down on the highway before opening night and ended up missing the

opening performance. Scarpia had to make a very quiet entrance. With *Tosca* it seems it's always something.

Despite the relatively minor mishap, the 1972 *Tosca* proved to be a big success for the company, especially in continuing to establish the company's reputation across the state. The Flint Journal and The Kalamazoo Gazette both ran detailed and very positive reviews. Both papers made it clear that they enjoyed what was termed an "outstanding" and "satisfying" production. It is important to note that both papers also made it clear that there was plenty of support for bringing opera to their communities and that this production was "significant." From the Flint Journal:

If the federal grant which enabled Overture to Opera to move this production out of Detroit is a good omen, the performance may come to be regarded as an equally significant milestone in the development of music in these parts. (Harvey, Performance)

Similar support was expressed in the Kalamazoo Gazette:

All in all, this was a gripping, highly professional production. The size and enthusiasm of the audience, which included many people not habitually present at Kalamazoo Symphony concerts, suggests that there is a market for opera in Kalamazoo, and an annual event of this kind could draw significant support. (Heintz, Fully)

The Detroit newspapers also ran supportive reviews. In the News Jay Carr continued to complain about the English translations and stated that Phyllis Curtin's tones were often "constructed and edgy" and that "her

singing frequently had more care than flair." But he also stated that her "characterization was intelligent, sensitive and personalized." Carr also had praise for Charles Hindsley as Cavaradossi saying that "his light, bright tones were deployed with ardor and his singing had plenty of ring and heft" (Carr, *Intelligent*). In the *Free Press* Collins George essentially concurred and then summarized by concluding that all of the Overture to Opera productions were "far superior to what might be expected of a local opera company" (George, *Fine*). Clearly DiChiera's company was growing in stature and its reputation was spreading across the state.

With one more production to go, the 1972 season was unfolding very nicely. The *Detroit Free Press* reported:

Dr. David DiChiera was absolutely delighted and a bit overwhelmed about the Detroit support and standing-room-only reaction to his Overture to Opera's *Così Fan Tutti* and *Tosca* performances. He is equally excited about next month's Menotti thriller, *The Medium*, which film star Sal Mineo will direct, checking into Detroit to begin rehearsals November 25. (Talbert, Bob)

"Sal Mineo's Doing What? An Opera??" (DeVine, Sal). That was the headline in the *Free Press*, and it reflected the excitement created by the announcement that indeed the legendary Sal Mineo was going to direct, and play the role of the deaf mute Toby, in *The Medium*. The announcement was a late one, on an insert in the *Tosca* program. It created a huge publicity buzz in all the local papers and media resulting in many articles and pictures. DiChiera had been looking around for

someone with some "star power." He had some discussions with another movie star, Anthony Perkins, that did not work out. Then he got an idea and wrote to Mineo, who was living in London, England at the time. DiChiera was quoted saying that "the idea just came to me. What can I say? I just thought of him and knew he'd be terrific" (DeVine, Sal).

DiChiera is a genius at this sort of casting and programming, tapping into the star community to enhance the prestige and the public relations potential of the company's activities. Time and again throughout the company's history, usually with impeccable timing to maximize the positive impact, DiChiera has contracted someone or some event with genuine star power. The popular excitement this creates, the boost to the marketing and public relations departments, and the prestige it gives the company are all important results. It is a critically important trait for an impresario. In 2001 Marc Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America, was quoted in the Detroit Free Press describing DiChiera:

David is as savvy a producer as there is in our business. He has tremendous insight into the sensibility of his audience, his community and what he can do in terms of interesting programming and what he must do to pay the bills. (Stryker, The Second)

It was good timing for Mineo as well. He had turned to directing in 1969 and left the Hollywood scene and punk typecasting roles behind. He took up residence in London and started his own production company, Serpentine Productions, with the intention of making films he was

interested in and producing stage plays in London. He was ready for this kind of challenge. He also had more than a passing interest in the subject matter of *The Medium*. "I have been involved with many séances although lately I haven't participated. Now I may go back to them because there is someone with who I wish to talk very much [sic]" (Smith, Sal).

The Sal Mineo news almost overshadowed the fact that Muriel Greenspon had been asked to return to do the title role of Madame Floria (Baba), a role that she had performed to rave reviews for DiChiera in 1967. After that performance she was chosen by Menotti himself to create the role for the famous Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. The critical acclaim was so positive that she was asked to return the following season for an unprecedented repeat production. Since then Greenspon was considered the world's leading interpreter of the role of Baba.

Greenspon, a native Detroit, had her first professional job in Detroit with Marjorie Gordon's Piccolo Opera Company singing in Menotti's *The Old Maid and The Thief*. Her long association with Menotti and his operas had begun early. She graduated from Cass Technical High School, studied at the Detroit Conservatory of Music and earned her Masters degree from the University of Michigan. She had gone on to join the New York City Opera and New York was her base of operations at the

time. She also spent much of her time in Spoleto and appeared regularly in the Italian Summer Festival. She had a unique and close relationship with Menotti, who she felt was a master opera writer:

He is such a man of the theater. He isn't as adventurous musically, perhaps, as some other contemporary composers are but he is more involved with the total effect of the work, not just the music. Menotti's works are so full of reality expressed through musical and theatrical means. (Smith, *Finest*)

Menotti's approach, and Greenspon's, fit perfectly with DiChiera's philosophy of presenting opera as vital theatre. Menotti, Greenspon and Sal Mineo; it was an exciting combination and it apparently made for an especially exciting rehearsal process. Mineo had an outsiders approach to the generally conventional medium of opera and was eager to experiment:

"I had no idea what I was in for," he said. The first thing was his meeting with Muriel Greenspon, the gifted singer who actually created the role under the direction of Gian-Carlo Menotti himself for the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy.

The second thing Mineo did was order the destruction of the set already designed and in place. He designed his own set.

"Nothing will be the same" said Mineo. "The second day after I met Muriel, she got excited and said she did all these things in Spoleto with Menotti and it worked there and why was I changing everything?!"

"I said you have to trust me. Then we talked, and a marvelous thing happened - she said, I do and I will." (DeVine, Sal)

The critical response to the double bill was very positive. The curtain raiser was Menotti's short, comic one-act *The Telephone*, in which a young man is constantly interrupted by the telephone while he is trying to propose to his girl. Finally he decides to leave the apartment and use the telephone himself as the only way to get her attention. It was directed by Hal Youngblood, Detroit radio personality and an active theatre director with a very good reputation in the local theatre community. The reviews were good: "Onita Sanders was properly coy and scatter-brained and Charles Roe appropriately exasperated in this lyric little joke" (George, Greenspon's). Also noteworthy: "Hal Youngblood's direction showed the same intelligence that he invariably brings to his radio projects" (Carr, Greenspon's).

The main event was, of course, the performance of *The Medium*. In the Detroit News Jay Carr said of Greenspon that "there can be no question that she is a spellbinder in the role," and that "Miss Greenspon was powerful" (Carr, Greenspon's). The Detroit Free Press called Greenspon's performance a "Tour de Force" and praised Phyllis Gaide, Christina Lypeckyj, Kenneth Young and especially Nancy Hoover in the supporting roles. In all, a great review.

It is almost a one-woman show -- Muriel Greenspon's. As the charlatan fortuneteller, Madame Flora, who finds out that things can happen beyond her control, she is nothing short of magnificent.

When Miss Greenspon sang the role here several seasons ago there was a bit of understatement in her acting. But in this all-out job one can see the fine hand of a new director, Sal Mineo, whose direction of the off-Broadway play, "Fortune and Men's Eyes," a few years back was equally full-bodied and explicit. Mineo, besides directing the opera, took the part of Toby, the deaf-mute in the work, making him a very personable, very appealing character.

In the pit, doing an excellent job as always with members of his Flint Symphony Orchestra was conductor William C. Byrd. (George, Greenspon's)

The 1972 Fall Season came to a close with much enthusiasm but there was fundamental uncertainty. Based on the tentative agreement with Mr. Gaskin in which the company was borrowing the theatre, the future was not secure. The series of events that was about to take place would establish the company's permanent identity, secure a home base from which to operate and expand its horizons by taking responsibility for a performing arts center as well as the opera company.

### **The Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts**

DiChiera and his opera company had proven to be such a good fit with the Music Hall and the activities there were so promising that throughout the fall of 1972 plans began to take shape that would save the theatre and establish a performing arts center. Earlier, Mr. Gaskin had been ready to find a permanent solution and was prepared to level the building to make way for a parking lot. He was persuaded to wait and a

chain of events began that set the course for the performing arts center to be born. DiChiera recalled:

We pulled together a group of prominent Detroit citizens, and presented them with the problem. An ad hoc committee took an overview and decided that this theatre had great potential. The city had nothing that filled that function. Nothing. No home for dance on a regular basis; no home for theater, except what was happening in the universities or at the Fisher Theater; no home for special events or musical programs other than the symphony and the Arts Institute. So the idea of a performing arts center seemed to be a natural development. We worked up a proposal and went to the Kresge Foundation. (Philp, Detroit's)

On February 8, 1973, the Detroit News announced that a citizens group headed by Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Peter B. Spivak had met with success, a \$225,000 Kresge Foundation grant had been secured and "the Music Hall will be acquired, renovated and turned into a full-time performing arts center" (Carr, Grant). It was a proud moment in the history of Detroit. A diverse group of civic-minded citizens had come together to save a beautiful, historic building, to invest in the arts and thereby invest in the spirit and well being of the city. With an eye on the future, these dedicated people donated their time, their money and their expertise in order to make this dream come true. A non-profit corporation was formed and Spivak put together a board of directors with the help of a core group that included "Detroit Renaissance President Robert McCabe; Harwood Rydholm, Chrysler vice-president for civic affairs; Charles

Hagler, General Motors manager of community affairs; Mrs. Roman S. Gribbs and others" (Carr, Grant). With the help and support of E. Ray Scott, Michigan Arts Council executive director, the parameters of the deal were set. In order to qualify for the Kresge Foundation grant the Music Hall would have to raise \$75,000 to finance operating deficits for the first two years and hire a full-time executive director.

Mr. Gaskin generously agreed to donate half of the asking price of \$360,000. This meant that \$180,000 of the Kresge money would be used for acquisition of the building and \$45,000 would be available to renovate the facility. With the Kresge grant in motion the next step was to secure the \$75,000 that had been required to cover operating deficits. By February 8, Spivak was also able to announce that Robert McCabe had reported, "Detroit Renaissance guaranteed the \$75,000 at its last board meeting" (Carr, Grant). The community was apparently ready to take a step to the next level in the performing arts. GM's Charles Hagler seemed to summarize what could be called the general goal of the project, explaining that the Music Hall would "bring a new sense of professionalism" (Carr, Grant) to performing arts activities in Detroit. There was a feeling that Detroit should take its place among the great urban centers in the world. The last piece of the puzzle was to hire a full-time executive director. A national search began. DiChiera was a leading candidate for the job.

### **Michigan Opera Theatre**

The next major occurrence in this chain of events in early 1973 was truly momentous. After months of consideration and planning DiChiera and Chrysler Board Chairman Lynn Townsend announced that the Overture to Opera Company, a division of the Detroit Grand Opera Association, would now be known as Michigan Opera Theatre. On March 22, 1973, the story first hit the newspapers with an article in The Eccentric Newspapers. In this article DiChiera was quoted saying that the new name would "definitely give us much more professional credibility nationally" (Smith, Overture).

The time had come for the opera company to formally establish its own identity and begin the process of separating from the Detroit Grand Opera Association. DiChiera, the Townsend's and their committee felt that the time was right and that the support was there. Mr. Townsend approached Frank Donovan, Chairman of the DGOA. Mr. Donovan explained:

One day Lynn Townsend called me and asked if I would have lunch with Ruth and himself. They told me that David had approached them with a plan for the establishment of a local opera company that would employ local singers, orchestras, choruses and the like, and asked me whether I thought it was feasible. I said I thought it was feasible provided Lynn was willing to take the responsibility for raising the money which the undertaking would require. He asked if our Association

would support such an activity by, in effect, devoting the balance of the Light Opera funds to the needs of the new opera company. (Met Tour Program, 1984)

The Detroit Light Opera Association was formed during World War II under the auspices of the J. L. Hudson Company, who provided the initial capital. After a number of successful seasons the interest faded and the operation closed down with a surplus of \$50,000 at the end of their last season. After the Met Tour began in Detroit in 1959, Mr. Donovan approached the trustees of the Detroit Light Opera Association and asked them to donate the \$50,000 to the DGOA. They agreed on the condition that the money be used for educational purposes. Upon Mr. Townsend's request the DGOA Executive Committee agreed to use the Light Opera legacy to support Michigan Opera Theatre. DiChiera recalled in 1973:

The money had been doled out to the Opera Theater in yearly portions of \$10,000, which will exhaust the legacy in two years. The grant amounted to no more than five percent of the Opera Theatre's annual \$200,000 budget. (Whittaker, It'll Cost)

The Light Opera legacy was essentially MOT's last formal connection to the DGOA until the summer of 2001 when the remaining DGOA membership voted to disband and fold their resources into MOT.

Michigan Opera Theatre, the name was a natural. It evolved out of DiChiera's philosophies of serving the entire state and of presenting a full range of opera and music theatre that was not just a musical experience

but a vital theatre experience as well. The company had recently met with great success in its activities in Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Midland, Alpena and Flint and DiChiera felt that it was critical to tap this enthusiasm. Referring to the experiences and the success they had touring around the state, colleague Roman Terleckyj confirmed: "Without a doubt, it made the company recognize its role in the development of culture in Michigan and becoming a cultural leader. It certainly had the support out in the rest of the state" (Terleckyj, 1997). With the new name they would create a mandate to serve the entire state. The new name also created a broad new market for public relations initiatives. Michigan Opera Theatre was a name that would encompass the exciting and ambitious scope of the expanding company. While the Music Hall was to be the company's home and DiChiera was proud to be a vital part of the renewed interest in the City of Detroit, in essence the company and its supporters were already a diverse collection of people from the greater metropolitan area and beyond. The name Overture to Opera would still be used to designate Michigan Opera Theatre's education and outreach programs, which was OTO's original function when DiChiera took it over. DiChiera recalled:

The name Michigan Opera Theatre identifies what we really are --- a full-fledged company with a membership in OPERA America, the national league of professional opera companies. And the name Overture to Opera describes the educational work that is of

continuing and vital importance to us. We're not new.  
We're simply more. (Opera Co.)

The new name reflected very few changes in the structure of the organization. Mr. and Mrs. Townsend were prepared to continue as chairmen of the opera's governing committee. In fact the OTO Committee at this point became the Founding Members of the Board of Directors of Michigan Opera Theatre. The importance of the committed effort by this dedicated group of supporters cannot be overstated. Their foresight and support made the dream possible. They are:

Mr. and Mrs. Lynn A. Townsend, Founding Chairmen  
Mr. and Mrs. Avern L. Cohn  
Mr. and Mrs. John DeCarlo  
Dr. and Mrs. David DiChiera  
Mr. and Mrs. Aaron H. Gershenson  
Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Graves  
Honorable and Mrs. Roman S. Gribbs  
Mr. and Mrs. John C. Griffin  
Mr. and Mrs. Harry L. Jones  
Honorable and Mrs. Wade McCree, Jr.  
Mr. Harry J. Nederlander  
Mr. E. Harwood Rydholm  
Mr. and Mrs. Neil Snow  
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Strichartz  
Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. VanderKloot  
Mr. and Mrs. Sam B. Williams  
Mr. and Mrs. Theodore O. Yntema

Along with the announcement that the company's new name would be Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT), DiChiera and Managing Director Robert Heuer announced what would be the most elaborate season so far. Slated as the 1973-1974 Season, it would be a fall-winter season, as

the third production would take place in January of 1974. The season would present three classics and begin on October 6, 1973 with *Rigoletto*, followed by a November 2 opening of *Madame Butterfly*, two of the greatest traditional works of the repertoire. The season would conclude with a January 18, 1974 opening of *The Merry Widow*, the company's first move into the world of light opera. Each opera had three evening performances and one matinee spread over two weekends. Also the company planned to repeat its successful benefit party "A Night at the Opera" at the Latin Quarter. "It's a zany evening, filled with skits, music, chianti, personality, pasta, fun and surprises" (Season, 1973-74). Planned for September 24, the benefit was a great way to kick off the new season.

DiChiera and Heuer were also able to reveal a new touring initiative. Taking care to keep Overture to Opera's activities as the education/outreach arm of MOT in the public eye, they announced a new Opera in Residence program. Armed with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, this residency program would bring trained teachers and craftsmen, including performing artists, into schools and communities for a week at a time to organize classes, lectures and workshops culminating in a fully-staged production at the end of the company's stay. There continued to be a dedicated emphasis put on the education/outreach activities. MOT would definitely encourage a continuation of the fundamental, grass roots effort to expose people from

all walks of life to the world of opera. The Opera in Residence program would begin in 1974.

### **Executive Director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts**

The final piece of the puzzle was put in place with the announcement on May 11, 1973, in the Detroit News that DiChiera, then thirty-six years old, was selected as Executive Director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. "The last element in the comeback of the downtown Music Hall materialized yesterday with the appointment of David DiChiera as executive director for a two year-term" (Carr, Music Hall picks). As such he would be wearing two hats, general director of the Michigan Opera Theatre and executive director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. He took official leave from his position at Oakland University. As it turned out he never went back.

In essence DiChiera was already wearing two hats as Music Department chairman and assistant dean at Oakland University and general director of the opera company. It would not be the last time that this energetic and dynamic young man would hold more than one position at the same time.

Judge Spivak, who was the head of the Music Hall Center's board of trustees, made the announcement from the stage of the Music Hall.

With his eclectic inclinations and background, DiChiera's record of activities over the past decade basically spoke for itself. After a nationwide search Spivak's group decided that they had in DiChiera a top-flight administrator and artist who knew the community very well and was eager to continue to build on the momentum that he himself had generated. It was a perfect fit. Spivak and DiChiera immediately announced plans for a year-round schedule of arts activities at the Music Hall. Along with MOT's operatic offerings would be a diverse schedule of theatre, dance, film, a jazz series, and special events like a Music Hall Center production of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. Judge Spivak was quoted in the Free Press: "This theater is open for business. And open to ideas for what we can have here . . . that will affect the cultural life of this community" (DeVine, New).

The theatre was indeed open for business and the events began almost immediately. Among the first activities were a renaissance concert by the Polish-American Congress and a performance by New York's Rod Rodgers Dance Company in the spring. More attention was focused on the center when a production called *The Gershwin Years* came in for a July 30 through August 4 run, starring Barbara Cook, Nancy Dussault, Helen Gallagher and Harold Lang.

By the end of the summer DiChiera was ready to release the 1973-74 Season Brochure for the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts.

This first season was almost incredible in its diversity and its star power and totaled over sixty performances. Along with MOT's slate of *Rigoletto*, *Madame Butterfly* and *The Merry Widow* there was dance, theatre, jazz and special events. The Dance Series began with The Martha Graham Company in performances of *Clytemnestra* on November 30 and two performances of *Appalachian Spring* on December 1. This was followed by classical ballet during the holiday season with The Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre in performances of *Romeo & Juliet*, *Peter & The Wolf* and *The Nutcracker Suite*. The legendary Maurice Bejart and his Ballet of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century came in for one performance on January 28, 1974. The Dance Series came to a close in March with one night of Agnes deMille's Heritage Dance Theatre and three performances of The Viola Farber Dance Company.

The Theatre Series, equally impressive, started with eight performances in September of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* starring Academy Award winning actress Eva Marie Saint. This was followed by a visit, in November, by the renowned Shaw Festival with eight performances of a production of *You Never Can Tell* featuring Shaw Festival Artistic Director Paxton Whitehead. On January 30 through February 3 the New York City Center Acting Company came to town and performed, in rotating repertory, Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, and U.S.A., a

play by John Dos Passos. Finally, for eight performances in March, was the Noel Coward musical *Oh Coward* starring Cyril Ritchard.

The Jazz Series featured performances by noted pianist Ellis Larkins, Cleo Laine with composer-conductor John Dankworth and his ensemble, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie and The Preservation Hall Jazz Band. Each artist was in town for one performance. There was also a Special Events Series with plenty of star power; *An Evening with Bobby Short*, *Charles Aznavour in Concert* and *Richard Kiley plays Cervantes*.

It was an astonishing slate of activities. Suddenly, the people of the Detroit metropolitan area had a single facility they could look to for pop stars, ballet companies, modern dance, theatre and opera. A vacuum was being filled and productions and performers whose nationwide tours had skipped Detroit for years now found themselves booked into this great theatre playing for supportive and appreciative audiences. The debut season at the Music Hall Center for The Performing Arts was by all accounts a tremendous success and the enthusiastic support in the community was palpable and growing. In a letter to DiChiera dated October 4, 1973, Detroit Mayor Roman Gribbs summarized the sentiment:

I want to express to you my deep interest and support for what you are doing for Detroit in your Music Hall venture.

It is a much-needed addition to our downtown night life and it provides a fine example of citizen initiative working through private enterprise.

I hope you will extend my sincere congratulations and best wishes for success to all those who are working with you on this vital community project.  
(Gibbs, 1973)

DiChiera and Michigan Opera Theatre were at the center of what was, for the first time in many years, a growing interest and excitement in downtown activities. Wearing two hats agreed with DiChiera. He ran MOT from offices on one floor of the Music Hall and the Performing Arts Center from separate offices on a different floor. Many of the opera staff members and volunteers doubled up their duties in those days as well, putting opera productions together at night and trying to organize a year's worth of other shows and concerts during the day.

The October 15, 1973 performance of *An Evening with Bobby Short* was a benefit performance for the new Music Hall Center. By this time DiChiera and Judge Spivak had put together a most impressive list of supporters. The program for the night's performance lists over two hundred patrons, sponsors, special contributors and members of the newly formed Board of Directors. The list literally reads like a Who's Who of the greater metropolitan Detroit area. Clearly there was a major commitment to making the Music Hall Center work. As Chairman of the Board of Directors, Judge Spivak wrote a note in the program that was intended to encourage the troops to keep spreading the word, and to buy

tickets. The note also expresses appreciation and a passion that this dedicated group had for doing what they deeply felt was the right thing:

When the idea of a "new" Music Hall was first broached-about sixteen months ago — many (too many) said "It can't be done."

The support of the business and labor community has been wonderful. We're grateful. The audiences have been a delight. Casts get standing ovations and bravos. They're thrilled. So are we. And the performers love our jewel of a theatre. And want to come back.

But we need more audience. This is a town that can produce 52,000 season tickets to theater. It does it every year. We'll settle for 2,000 — for a start. Impossible? No, our tenant the opera has gone from 800 to over 2200 in the last year. Hooray for them. Promise of what is to come for us.

It's exciting doing this. We're all volunteers. We're preserving an irreplaceable building. Yes. We're presenting things that otherwise Detroit would not see. Yes. But most of all we're trying to do our part for the great people that make up our community.

Music Hall is a place to come back to. We love it and we love the opportunity working here gives us.  
(Spivak, Short)

### **It Can't Be Done**

"DiChiera is fighting more than just financial woes. He is also working within a cultural milieu that can be overtly hostile to the arts" (Kennicott, Motown). This quote from Opera News in 1996 describes the state of affairs in the early 1970s. The odds were against an effort like this. As Judge Spivak said, a lot of people felt it simply couldn't be done. An arts initiative of this magnitude seemed out of the question. This

attitude reflected what could be described as a cultural inferiority complex that existed in the greater Detroit area in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Detroit was of course the Motor City, a factory town, with big time sports traditions and very little commitment to the arts. At the two most significant mileposts in the company's history, in the early 1970s leading up to the opening of the Music Hall and twenty years later in the early 1990s leading up to the opening of the Detroit Opera House, DiChiera and MOT battled the same negative attitudes. DiChiera recalled in 1996:

It's one of the interesting dynamics about Detroit - — from the very beginning, when I started the Opera Company and opened Music Hall, Detroiters themselves tended to have a kind of low threshold of what they thought they could achieve culturally. They accepted the idea that this was what they considered a "blue-collar town" and that you just don't do things like this in a blue-collar town. You had to do it almost imperceptibly without shaking anybody up too much because they [would] think it was not possible. (Scott, Opera)

This low threshold of what people thought could be achieved culturally combined with a very difficult social and political landscape and tremendous financial challenges to make the task enormous, close to impossible. The recessionary times in the 1970s and a state government in the 1980s that was not only not supporting the arts but also dramatically cutting arts funding, made it difficult all along the way. On the local scene, the kinds of incentives offered to local sports franchises

were never offered to arts organizations. In the early 1970s, still in the aftermath of the 1967 riots, Detroit was struggling. Much of the white middle class, and the tax base, had fled to the suburbs. Retail stores, residential and commercial enterprises were disappearing.

It was DiChiera's vision and his commitment that made the difference. As early as 1963, Opera News had suggested that there was a sense in the community that "Detroit could be a great operatic center if local effort had time to take root and grow to a high level" (Lingg, Opera). DiChiera understood this community and decided to stay with it. It turned out to be a lifetime commitment. Roman Terleckyj described DiChiera:

The only thing that really stands out in my mind back then was the incredible faith that David had in his vision. That seemed to be indefatigable in the building of this company. I really haven't met anybody else like David in this profession who really started in a community that was so ripe for the development of this art form, had the incredible individual vision and gave his life for it. You give your life to that particular idea and David has and this theatre [the Detroit Opera House] stands as a monument to him. And not only to him and the opera company, but also to a lot of what Detroit is about today and its hopes for its revitalization. (Terleckyj, 1997)

What happened with MOT could only have been achieved one way.

Establishing a major regional opera company, beginning something that would be a spark to unleashing the spirit and the potential of a city and leading the rejuvenation of a world-class entertainment district would

indeed take indefatigable vision and commitment. In 1973, DiChiera was well on his way.

The regular, everyday kinds of activities for which the opera company had become known also continued in early 1973. Along with preparing the upcoming opera season and the Music Hall Center programs there were several notable events that helped build toward the fall season and helped maintain a high profile in the community.

In what would be the last production under the name Overture to Opera, on January 6, 1973, the company performed two shows of Vittorio Giannini's children's opera *Beauty and the Beast*. It featured Roman Terleckyj as the Father, Patricia Gail White as Beauty and Gene Wabeke as the Beast. Directed by Steven A. Bleeke and with costumes by Keller O'Neil it took place at the Detroit Institute of Arts as part of the Detroit Youtheatre series. As was the custom for MOT, the production was in English.

The lectures and appearances continued for DiChiera when he spoke on April 13 to the Birmingham Bloomfield chapter of Parents Without Partners. The topic had to do with things to do at night in greater Detroit and it gave DiChiera a chance to plug the idea of having a variety of choices of arts activities to get involved with, just what he was doing at the Music Hall. The company was also on the Grosse Pointe War Memorial Association program of activities for a May 2 evening that

included a production of *The Medium* and scenes from *The Barber of Seville*, *Macbeth*, *Lucia di Lammermoor* plus scenes from the upcoming Metropolitan Opera season. DiChiera was on hand to narrate and give program notes.

The production of *The Medium* was actually part of a tour schedule that included performances at Hamtramck, Waterford Mott, Warren Lincoln and St. Clair Shores Lakeview High Schools. This revival of *The Medium* featured Barbara Lockard as Baba. This veteran performer was an Assistant Professor of Voice and the Director of Opera Theatre at Bowling Green State University at the time and had an extensive resumé which included having previously performed the role of Baba. Popular Detroit actor David Patrick Kelly was on board to play Toby and veterans Nancy Hoover, Phyllis Gaide, Kenneth Young and Christina Lypecky were on hand to reprise the roles they had performed in 1972 with Muriel Greenspon and Sal Mineo.

Karen DiChiera's diverse activities continued as well. Along with helping on season tickets, writing program notes for tour performances, helping organize volunteers, helping on the program book and maintaining her music appreciation series in Birmingham, Bloomfield and Troy schools, she hatched another new idea; an opera coloring book. The idea for the coloring book grew out of a technique that she used with her young piano students. Dedicated to a humanities approach to

teaching music, she would talk to her piano students about the composers' lives, where they lived and worked. She would ask her students to listen to records and draw pictures about the composers' lives. She came up with an idea to create a coloring book on the life of Guiseppe Verdi. It would be an excellent music appreciation tool and the sale of the book was intended to be a fundraiser for MOT's educational activities.

Articulating her philosophy, Karen DiChiera was quoted in the *Detroit News*: "Children are given too much watered down stuff. We should be challenging them with more creative materials" (Breitmeyer, Verdi). The article included a picture of Karen with the DiChiera's second daughter Lisa, then six years old, coloring the life of Verdi. Karen called on two friends to help produce the book. It was illustrated by Cranbrook Academy of Arts fabric design graduate Cheri Keeler and written by Bloomfield Hills teacher Joan Hill. Karen's father Robert VanderKloot published 10,000 copies of the book at his Adland Press and they were priced at \$2.50 a book. It was a labor of love as everyone involved donated their time and services so that all the income could go to support opera company educational activities. The production of the book was scheduled so that it could go on sale for the first time at *A Night at the Opera*, the upcoming benefit party at the Latin Quarter. After that it was on sale at bookstores all around metropolitan Detroit and in Ann Arbor.

By September Michigan Opera Theatre was geared up and ready for the 1973-74 Season to begin. It was the first season using the new name, and rehearsals for *Rigoletto* began on September 19. The first event of the season, *A Night at the Opera*, took place on September 29 and by all accounts this benefit Opera Party was a great success, raising significant money and expanding the support group. A committee led by Mrs. R. Jamison Williams and Mrs. Sam Williams organized the party. "Theatrics and Antics for Funds," and "Spoofing Everything For the Sake of Opera" were the headlines in the social pages as the event got detailed coverage in both the Detroit News and Free Press.

Some 500 of the town's social and civic heavies turned out for the 1973 "Night at the Opera" party at the Latin Quarter. Paying \$40 apiece, they saw themselves spoofing everything from opera to Women's Lib in the evening-long extravaganza where everyone, including stagehands and singing waiters, dropped their decorum.

Traditional touches to the party included the appearances of father and daughter team, Mrs. David DiChiera and her father Robert VanderKloot, a printing executive. The pair recreated the words to "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" and brought down the house as they tap danced their way through Bernie Katz's version of "Brush Up Your Verdi." (Whittaker, Spoofing)

Most, but not all of the entertainment was intended for laughs.

Coloratura Louise Russell and tenor John Sandor were on hand to sing selections from the upcoming *Rigoletto*. For the rest of the evening it was comedy all the way including original songs and skits including one with

Judge Spivak in a scarlet and white print flowing pharaoh's robe. Among other highlights:

Benefit chairman Mrs. R. Jamison Williams hitched up her Pucci gown and got her legs shaved by baritone Charles Roe while he belted out an aria from Rossini's "Barber of Seville." The capacity crowd roared with laughter when Maurice J. "Bud" Lezell, who's better known as television's Mr. Belvedere, and two of his helpers from his home repair business sang a song he wrote about the Opera Theatre.

Tom and Diane Schoenith, were done up as birds. Mrs. Sue Marx, a free-lance photographer, and Lucy DeVine, wife of Free Press theater critic Larry DeVine, as harem girls, wore gauzy pajamas and crop tops baring a considerable amount of midriff.  
(Breitmeyer, Theatrics)

The Opera Benefit Party began a tradition that continues today. Now known as the Opera Ball, it's an opportunity for the core group of dedicated supporters to get together and celebrate their efforts. It also has been and continues to be a significant fundraiser. This is a dedicated and focused group where even the annual party is taken as an opportunity to raise funds for their beloved MOT. They understand the needs and their reason for existence.

### **A Foundation Solidified**

**1973-74**

All the pieces were coming together for MOT's first *Rigoletto* and the opening of the 1973-74 mainstage season. DiChiera and Managing

Director Heuer had carefully planned the details and the OPERA America connection was already paying dividends. As a result of OPERA America networking and recommendations, the sets for *Rigoletto* were borrowed from the Seattle Opera Association. DiChiera and Heuer also made a connection with the well-known costume house Malabar Limited in Toronto to rent costumes for all three productions in the 1973-74 Season. This connection with Malabar Ltd. proved to be a winner in that the relationship established in 1973 is one that continues to the present day. MOT still uses the outstanding Malabar Ltd. on a regular basis as a provider of a diverse range of costumes. The season ticket committee with its forty-two team captains, still chaired by Mrs. Donald E. Young, had met with so much success that because of their efforts, virtually the entire season was sold out. The program book even took on a new improved look. The Souvenir Program Committee, chaired by Mrs. Lloyd H. Diehl, had produced the first glossy, expanded program book which included a marked increase in the quality and number of ads. This type of program is still being used today. It was a first class program that was yet another indication of MOT's growing stature professionally. Another notable aspect of this season, listed for the first time in the program book was the Michigan Opera Theatre Dancers, a core group that could be relied upon for the company's dance and ballet needs. The dancers were all members of the University of Detroit - Marygrove College Dance

Program. Dance Coordinator Dominic Missimi and Ballet Master Iacob Lascu were in the lead and their valuable contributions to MOT productions would continue for many years to come. A solid, reliable connection to the dance community was critical and the relationship with Marygrove would prove to be important and long lasting.

The *Rigoletto* rehearsal and production schedule was intensive. It included, just like the previous year, a full performance as the guests of the Kalamazoo Symphony Society in Western Michigan University's Miller Auditorium, along with the four performances at the Music Hall. With a three thousand-seat house, Miller Auditorium was a huge space compared to the intimate confines of the Music Hall. It was, of course, a unique challenge to make the production work in both theatres.

The rehearsal schedule concluded with a full run through on Saturday, September 29, after which cast, crew, staff and production packed up and left for Kalamazoo for a music rehearsal with the Kalamazoo Symphony in Miller Auditorium the very next day. By Monday evening the production was loaded into the theatre, the Kalamazoo extras were blocked into place, and all was ready for a 7:30 p.m. full dress rehearsal. The performance was Tuesday, October 2, 1973. Immediately after, the production was loaded out and everyone headed back for a 5:00 p.m. music rehearsal with the Flint Symphony at Oakland University on Wednesday and a full dress rehearsal in the Music Hall on Thursday. All

was in readiness and *Rigoletto* opened on Saturday, October 6, 1973 for a four-performance run.

DiChiera put together an outstanding group for *Rigoletto*. He contacted the noted Emerson Buckley to conduct the production. This internationally recognized music authority was, among his other affiliations, music director and conductor of the Fort Lauderdale Symphony Orchestra at the time. It turned out that while he was eager to come and work with MOT, he was only available for the Kalamazoo performance. Because of Buckley's stature DiChiera contracted him for the one performance. To conduct the Detroit performances DiChiera brought in Roger Melone, who was the assistant conductor of the San Antonio Symphony. Melone was also a frequent guest conductor around the Southwest who was noted for his choral conducting as well as his orchestral work. Melone worked closely with Buckley who in essence, served as music director, providing the cuts and the rehearsal letterings for the score that would be used as the master score for this production. It was certainly a wonderful opportunity but it also must have been a real challenge for the cast to have two different conductors, with two different orchestras and perform in two very different theatres all within a very short, intense time span.

DiChiera contracted Tito Serebrinsky as stage director. Born in Argentina and trained at the Colon Theatre in Buenos Aires, this young

man had become active on the international scene and at the time was resident stage director at the Marseilles Opera House. *Rigoletto* was Serbrinsky's North American directorial debut. Three principals with impressive resumés headlined a cast that was filled out with MOT veterans. Louise Russell was slated to sing the role of Gilda. She made her New York City Opera debut in 1969 and had built a strong resumé which included singing at the State Opera of Stuttgart and as the only American in a La Scala cast of *Rigoletto*, which included Pavarotti. She had also appeared with the Philadelphia Lyric Opera as Nedda opposite Met stars Placido Domingo and Sherrill Milnes. The Duke of Mantua was played by John Sandor who had appeared with the San Francisco, Santa Fe and Miami Opera Companies. He had a Masters Degree in voice from the Julliard School of Music and was due to begin duties as a principal artist with the Vienna State Opera after this *Rigoletto*. Leading the cast, as the hunchbacked jester was to be Met veteran Calvin Marsh. After twelve years on the Met stage he made his European debut in 1966 and sang at Geneva, Glyndebourne and Munich where his *Rigoletto* won him a fourteen-curtain-call ovation. All appeared to be ready but as Jay Carr said in the Detroit News; "If you think there weren't problems, you don't know about staging operas" (Carr, test).

Two days before the Kalamazoo performance Calvin Marsh, the veteran bass scheduled to sing the title role, developed throat problems

and had to bow out due to illness. Employing what is perhaps the impresario's most important skill, that of handling disasters and crises', especially those of the last minute variety, DiChiera got on the telephone and tapped into his network of resources. He found the young American baritone Adib Fazah. Fazah had literally just completed his debut at the New York City Opera as Tonio in *I Pagliacci* on Sunday and when he got home that night he found an emergency message from DiChiera. Willing and able, Fazah said yes and came to Kalamazoo the next day for the Monday dress rehearsal followed by the Tuesday performance. Fazah, born in Cleveland of Lebanese descent, had performed with the San Francisco, Santa Fe and Boston Opera Companies and the Opera Society of Washington. He had recently sung *Rigoletto* in Santa Fe to critical acclaim.

The Kalamazoo Gazette reported that the production drew the largest crowd ever to a single concert of the regular subscription series. An audience of over three thousand filled Miller Auditorium for a production that was called "The Best Yet." The headline proclaimed: "Opera Hits A New Peak Here With Rigoletto" (Heintz, Opera). Fazah was up to the challenges of coming in at the last minute and earned good reviews with the Gazette reporting that he had "acquitted himself nobly, acting with conviction and singing with a restrained, beautifully supported voice" (Heintz, Opera). Jay Carr of the Detroit News was in attendance

and was also impressed by Fazah. " He sang smoothly and with a nice sense of line, especially in the third act." Carr's review was supportive and positive:

It was in fact the Michigan Opera Theatre's best job to date of staging a bread-and-butter opera. The singers' voices had more size and thrust than one would have thought possible in the large hall, and although Buckley's tempos were on the slow side, there were times when the performance took off, especially in the concerted numbers.

Tenor John Sandor was the Duke. Given the orchestral volume and the hall's size, he opted for belting out his arias, and his tones had ring and heft when he needed them. Z. Edmund Tolliver contributed a sonorous Sparafucile, Elsie Inselman was a convincing Maddalena, John Henkel mustered the requisite dignity for Merone; Davis Gloff projected personality as the courtier Marullo, and the chorus sang out with vigor. (Carr, test)

It should also be noted that the performance was recorded for broadcast on WMUK (FM) 102.1 in Kalamazoo, a radio station specializing in public affairs and cultural broadcasting. The recording was aired on Friday October 5, 1973 as a delayed broadcast.

At the Music Hall the production was met with sold out houses and much anticipation. The Free Press called the production "stylish" and stated flatly: "The presentations of the Michigan Opera Theater, formerly the Overture to Opera Company, are always stylish, well-costumed and professionally produced" (George, Stylish). The English translation, however, continued to be a point of discussion with both the Free Press

and the News complaining about this one. The Detroit News said it, "prevented Puccini's lines from soaring and; as usual, was largely incomprehensible" (Carr, Inbal). After affirming a basic understanding of the use of English, the Free Press admitted: "the English translation which the cast sang was unintelligible most of the time. The company should have a good coach in English diction" (George, Stylish).

The final production at the Music Hall had one further development. Fazah was not available for the last performance so DiChiera had booked yet another Rigoletto to finish this run, the veteran Chester Ludgin. He was a frequent performer with the New York City Opera and the San Francisco Opera. He too made a favorable impact and the Flint Journal called him "a tower of strength" and said, "his characterization had the assurance of a seasoned veteran" (Harvey, Splendid). The review called the overall production "Splendid" and remarked how they were looking forward to a MOT production of *Madame Butterfly* which was due to visit the next month.

Two conductors with two different orchestras in two very different theatres in two cities with three different Rigolettos, all in under three weeks. It must have been very exciting, and this was just the first production of the season. Next it was on to *Madame Butterfly* and the continuation of the first season under the new name, Michigan Opera Theatre.

By all accounts *Madame Butterfly* was a complete success. The review from the Windsor Star with the headline "Excellence marks Puccini's *Butterfly*" began by stating:

That sense of polished competence that marked the performance by the Michigan Opera Theatre of *Rigoletto* last month was heightened to the point of professional excellence Friday night with the presentation of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* in Detroit's Music Hall. (De Bono, Excellence)

The production had four performances in the Music Hall followed by one performance on November 17, 1973 in Flint's Whiting Auditorium. The cast was a perfect example of DiChiera's philosophies of using superior local talent combined with artists from the international scene, casting singers that looked the parts and were believable dramatically. Charles Hindsley was back after his successful turn in MOT's *Tosca* to sing Pinkerton. Veterans Charles Roe and Andreas Poulimenos were also back to alternate in the role of Sharpless and stalwart Elsie Inselman was on hand to sing the role of Suzuki. Other MOT veterans included Roman Terleckyj, Mike Albright and Jan Albright as Kate Pinkerton. Also, William Byrd was on the podium once again to conduct all the performances.

For the title role DiChiera contracted the young Korean soprano Kyu Do Park. She made her professional debut as Cio-Cio-San in this MOT production. She was active with the American Opera Center in New

York where she had performed several leading roles and was a soloist with the Dartmouth Symphony Orchestra but was a relative unknown at the time. What a find she turned out to be. To complete the team DiChiera brought in Tsutomu Masuko, a versatile singer and stage director. He was booked to direct the production and sing the role of Goro, the marriage broker. At the time he was Director of the Opera Theatre at Ball State University in Indiana. He had performed in opera and as a symphonic soloist all over the world and had served as Stage Director with the Chicago Lyric Opera and the San Diego Opera. The reviews were enthusiastic:

One hardly can imagine a fresher-looking "Madam Butterfly" than the Michigan Opera Theatre staged yesterday afternoon in the Music Hall. Korean soprano Kyu Do Park (as) Butterfly for once looked like the teenage Japanese bride she is supposed to be. And Charles Hindsley had the good looks to convince as Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton. (Carr, Inbal)

Wayne State's newspaper, The South End, summarized the critical response. "Beautiful and expressive singing characterized the opening of the Michigan Opera Theatre's production of 'Madame Butterfly.'" They singled out Kyu Do Park. "Her voice produced inflections ranging from bubbly happiness to deepest sorrow, and the audience rewarded her excellent performance by numerous curtain calls" (Brown, Opera). The Detroit Free Press called the production "An Operatic Beauty" and in a very positive review gave credit to William Byrd for "excellent pacing" and

a "thoroughly satisfactory orchestra." Charles Hindsley was singled out for his "clear, ringing tenor," and Kyu Do Park was called "marvelous. She brings complete authenticity to the role both in singing and acting. Her voice is rich, luscious, colorful and pure" (George, Operatic). Overall the production was summed up by the Birmingham Eccentric: "excellent direction from Tsutomu Masuko, exquisite and functional wardrobe and set, and stellar performances both vocally and theatrically by the entire cast" (Brockman, *Madame*).

For MOT the new year began with rehearsals for *The Merry Widow* starting on January 4, 1974. It was the first season to be spread out from fall into the winter. Featured in the leading roles were two nationally recognized figures and the cast included company regulars, a large chorus and the Marygrove dancers. Catherine Christensen sang the title role. Well known on the East Coast for her performances as the Widow, this Metropolitan Opera Studio veteran had performed with opera companies in San Francisco, Boston, Fort Worth, Santa Fe and New York City. Her most recent credits included an opera recording and film work. Well-known Metropolitan Opera baritone John Reardon was contracted to sing the role of Danilo. After establishing himself with the New York City Opera and then the Met, Reardon was enjoying a career that included performances with many of the nations leading opera companies, frequent appearances on television, and in 1972 an appointment as

Artistic Director of the Wolf Trap Company. MOT veteran, Charles Roe, was on hand to alternate with Reardon as Danilo and Edward Kingins, longtime company friend and colleague was booked to sing the role of Camille. The company also featured Canadian Opera Company bass Jan Rubes, and well-known Detroiters Jan Albright and Davis Gloff.

The production staff, with the exception of Stage Director Lois Bewley, was made up of company regulars. William Byrd was on hand to conduct, Ray Allvin was still chorus master, Roman Terleckyj was listed as assistant director for the first time and Karen DiChiera was in charge of props. Karen continued to be a part, at one time or another, of virtually every aspect of the company's activities, taking on whatever job needed to be done. As director and choreographer Lois Bewley came with a very impressive resumé. She had been a dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, the American Ballet Theatre, the Jerome Robbins Ballet U.S.A. and the New York City Ballet. She had appeared on Broadway and on television, and served as choreographer for the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre. One of her most recent credits was particularly notable; she directed, choreographed, designed the costumes and danced in the U.S. premiere of *Maskarade* by Carl Nielsen for the St. Paul Opera Association.

The enthusiasm that had developed during the season's first two productions resulted in a tremendous demand for tickets for *The Merry*

**Widow.** Because of this an extra production was added to the schedule. The critical response was almost all favorable. While acknowledging "superb" singing, the Birmingham Eccentric complained about the "tedious" acting of the women saying: "the gentlemen have it all as the women tread artlessly through the script" (Reynolds, Tedious). The Detroit Free Press ran a completely positive review with the headline: "A Zany Merry Widow' Is Glorious Opera." Christensen had "special exuberance" and was "truly moving" and Reardon was "vocally excellent and his acting matched Mrs. Christensen's." Other highlights from this review by longtime supporter Collins George:

...one of the finest productions yet to come out of the Michigan Opera. Gorgeous settings, colorful costumes, fine choral singing and lively dancing - all did their part in a broadly conceived production. The story of the millionairess and her handsome lover is told with such humor and zany mixups that you found yourself laughing, in spite of full knowledge of what's to come. Lois Bewley's direction never dated itself. The large cast was wholly outstanding. Detroit Edward Kingins, fully matched the other singers with his professionalism as the would-be lover of the ambassador's wife.  
(George, Zany)

### **Individual Contributions**

Throughout its history Michigan Opera Theatre has been sustained by vital contributions from devoted individuals. It is a truly significant phenomenon. Indeed, without this kind of individual contribution the company simply could not have developed and solidified as it did. It is a

crucial mandate for any budding performing arts organization: finding a way to tap into the individual resources in the community and securing a strategy that encourages, nurtures and keeps connected members of the community on the team. A way must be found to encourage and sustain passionate, meaningful involvement.

For MOT the contributions take the form of tremendous financial support as well as heartfelt contributions of time and service. There have already been several examples in this study. Brief highlights of the efforts of two other of the many notable volunteers, Pauline Young and J. Addison Bartush, help describe the phenomenon. Pauline Young's enthusiastic support for MOT has already been noted. She was chairman of the Season Ticket Committee for the 1972 and 1973-74 seasons. Her enthusiasm resulted in an unprecedented number of ticket sales with both seasons virtually sold out. A Detroit Free Press feature on her referred to how she had "turned a ticket-selling assignment into something akin to a holy crusade" (Angelo, Performing). She was up against tough odds, facing the challenge of convincing people that they could and should come back downtown. Married to Donald Young who was Vice-President of Burroughs Corporation and President of the Detroit Chamber of Commerce in 1974, they were both heavily involved in the community. Her primary focus was the arts and she was quoted regarding her conviction: "I think these things are important to making the whole

person" (Angelo, Performing). It was a noble sentiment. After the 1973-74 Season she went on to become the chairman of the Music Hall Volunteer Association. Well-connected, enthusiastic and determined, Pauline Young made a tremendous difference. Her contribution was exemplary.

Over the years, J. Addison Bartush, who has been actively involved for virtually the entire history of the company, has made another exemplary individual contribution. This kind of long-term support is critical to the stability of any company. Enthusiastic, hands-on participation, generous financial support and even technical support were all part of his diverse contributions. Bartush was special chairman of the afterglow at the Detroit Athletic Club which followed the opening performance of *The Merry Widow* on January 18, 1973. After making his debut as a waiter in the production he hosted what was called a "highly successful" party by the MOT newsletter. It went on to say: "Mr. Bartush went from waiter to host with his usual aplomb and good spirits" (Footnotes, Score). The next year, for the 1974-75 Season, the program includes this note: "This production of *Die Fledermaus* is made possible in part by a most generous gift from Mr. and Mrs. J. Addison Bartush" (MOT 1974-75).

Mr. Bartush also made a remarkable contribution to the MOT archive. Beginning with the 1975 production of *Porgy and Bess* and

continuing through the 1989 Season, Mr. Bartush is responsible for recording over three hundred reel-to-reel audiotapes of MOT productions. He taped first and second casts of many productions and stored them in his basement. The complete collection now resides in the MOT Archive at the Detroit Opera House. It was a phenomenal effort that resulted in a priceless archival collection. Mr. Bartush has also been on MOT's Board of Directors since the 1976-77 Season. Individual contributions are the building blocks of the foundation of a company. In this country, without government support, individual and corporate contributions and support have been critical and have made the difference between survival and failure.

There was one sad note during the run of *The Merry Widow*. Conductor and Music Director William Byrd was stricken with a mild heart attack and was unable to finish all the performances. Victor Feldbril, conductor of the Toronto Symphony stood in for Byrd for the remaining performances, taking a plane back and forth between each production. After an initial recovery Byrd was struck with a second heart attack and passed away while conducting an outdoor concert with the Flint Symphony Orchestra on July 8, 1974. He was 47 years old. DiChiera was quoted in the MOT Newsletter:

Bill Byrd's death is a great loss not only to Michigan Opera Theatre but to the arts in Michigan. In addition to his consummate musical ability, he had a

unique way of working with people and winning their confidence as both a conductor and an administrator. We at MOT shall miss very much his advice, judgement and, above all, his friendship. (Byrd, Score)

Because he had been such an important part of MOT's development, it was decided that the 1974-75 Season would be dedicated to the memory of William Byrd.

On a much happier note, DiChiera's stature and influence in the opera community was on the rise in the spring of 1974. OPERA America, the league of professional opera companies in the United States, elected DiChiera to its Board of Directors at its annual meeting in Washington D.C. After only two years of membership DiChiera was already moving into a leadership role. His active involvement would keep MOT in the mainstream of activity with regards to the regional opera company movement in America.

For MOT the foundation was solidified in the spring of 1974. Enthusiasm and optimism were at high levels. Culminating in a wonderful first season as Michigan Opera Theatre, the growth of the company since DiChiera took it over in 1963 had been nothing short of spectacular. In just over a decade he had brought the company to fruition. The foundation was laid and there was a bright future. There was a name, Michigan Opera Theatre, which reflected the company's intended mandate to serve the entire state and region. There was a home base in

the beautiful Music Hall Theatre. Besides being General Director of MOT there was DiChiera's position as Executive Director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts combining to make him, without a doubt, one of the key cultural leaders in the community. Also, there was not only a membership in OPERA America, but by virtue of his active involvement as a member of the Board of Directors (followed by two terms as President) DiChiera was at the center of the regional opera company movement, becoming an influential figure on the national scene.

### **Filling A Void**

To put things into a larger context nationally and consider the broader picture one must look at the combination of the rise of OPERA America and the regional opera company movement and the decline of the Met Tour as Detroit's primary opera resource. There were two dynamics at work: the expansion and growth of the regional opera company movement with MOT and DiChiera at the center of the activities, and the almost inevitable decline of the once mighty Met Tour. The Tour was starting to show telling signs of mortality in terms of rising costs and declining quality. The original luster was beginning to fade.

A very telling article about the Met Tour with a cautionary headline appeared in the Detroit Free Press. Right in the middle of MOT's successful 1973-74 Season, there were serious questions regarding the

**DGOA and the Met Tour: "It'll Cost You More to See the Opera Next Spring. Deficit Brings Ticket Price Hike." The article reported that there was "a \$2.8 million deficit facing the Met at the end of its current season" and that the DGOA had suffered "a loss of \$8,256.37 for the Met's appearance." Ticket prices were to go up and other fundraising ideas would have to be found to offset these losses.**

**Financial ills of the two groups were outlined in the opera association's final financial report of the season. The group said its \$8,000 loss in itself does not seem a bothersome figure, but that it is the tip of an enormous financial iceberg which is painted red and that changes must be made in the future handling of association and Met finances. In September, association officers met with Metropolitan Opera accountants in Chicago, along with representatives of other Met host cities, including Boston, Cleveland, Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis and Minneapolis. (Whittaker, It'll Cost)**

**The mighty Met Tour was starting to look vulnerable. It became increasingly clear that, while surely unintentional, the Met Tour was holding back the growth of regional opera in the host cities because of the high financial drain on the available resources in these communities. It was beginning to be clear that the Met Tour was becoming an impediment to the growth of regional opera. In an interview Karen DiChiera recalled:**

**The Met was coming to town, in the person of the legendary Francis Robinson, raising huge amounts of money, some to help pay for the tour and the rest was going back to New York. It wouldn't have been so bad if the money was used to finance the Tour and to help support our local company, but that wasn't the case.**

**We were on our own. That's what I started to resent.  
(DiChiera, K., 1996)**

**Clearly it is safe to say that she was not alone, and that Detroit was surely not the only host city that was beginning to get a clear picture of the situation and the financial drain on their local resources.**

**In the larger historical perspective, the ascendance of MOT was timed with the decline of the Met Tour. By 1985 when the Met Tour would finally come to an end, MOT was a proven, respected company, primed and ready to fill the void. The regional opera movement was starting to take hold and membership in OPERA America was on the rise. DiChiera and MOT were at the center of this activity and on the vanguard of this movement.**

## CHAPTER V

### "A TRIUMPH OF REGIONAL OPERA"

The next era in the history of the company would be the critical gestation period. During this time span, from 1974 through the spring of 1985, Michigan Opera Theatre would come into its own and be recognized as a legitimate entity in the cultural milieu of greater metropolitan Detroit and Michigan. MOT had become the professional operatic resource in the surrounding region:

Michigan Opera Theatre is a triumph of regional opera. David DiChiera's uncompromising good sense, long-term patience and touch of class have substantiated his old idea. His work in Detroit is a model of audience-building technique, his company stands as an example of what opera can mean to Americans. (Wadsworth, Motown)

This statement from a positive and very supportive article in the respected Opera News came in October, 1976. There was much attention focused on MOT that year. It was an especially notable season for the company which included *Washington Square*, the MOT commissioned, world premiere by American composer Thomas Pasatieri. The production was truly a significant historical milepost. It was clear that the strategies and philosophies for regional opera that DiChiera had put into place were paying off and that MOT and DiChiera were achieving a prominent position in the opera world. Maintaining and building on the support base

would be the key as clearly the biggest challenges would be financial.

The goal in this era would be to lock in the strategies and build on the resources. The goal of this chapter is to chronicle the events that would lead to MOT being considered the operatic resource in the region, able to produce world-class mainstage grand opera and to attend to its mission to serve the entire state by touring and with residence productions, earning the reputation of being a model of audience building technique along the way.

This chapter begins in 1974. In order to put the challenges and achievements into perspective it is necessary to consider briefly the socio-economic climate and the political landscape of that time both nationally and locally. The turbulent times in the 1970s are well documented. Watergate was in full swing and on August 9, 1974 President Nixon resigned. America had experienced an oil embargo and was in an energy crisis which, of course, had a huge impact on the automobile industry. In 1974, "worldwide inflation helps to cause dramatic increases in the cost of fuel, food and materials" (Grun, Timetables).

"It's an arbitrary call, but metro Detroit hits bottom in 1976," reports the Detroit Almanac. The Almanac also states that in 1976, "racial politics flourish. In Detroit the leadership of Coleman Young more and more rankles suburban whites" (Detroit Almanac). There was certainly no

shortage of complex, volatile issues. In Detroit in 1976 there was a major HUD scandal, police lay-offs combined with a surge in street gang activity, double-digit unemployment in the region and a sinking U.S. auto industry. These were very difficult times indeed. Michigan Opera Theatre was able to grow and establish itself despite the bleak picture in the national and local economies. It was a remarkable achievement, all things considered. DiChiera was able to assemble a Board of Directors from a coalition of influential members of the community and instill in them a true sense of ownership. A board was built that could provide financial backing and tap corporate resources in the community. The institution itself had to be beyond politics and it had to find reliable support even in a terrible economy. Since the government was neither in a position nor of a mind to provide the necessary support, DiChiera and his board were on their own. The effort would have to be, as Mayor Gribbs had articulated: "citizen initiative working through private enterprise" (Gribbs, 1973). It was a tall order and is a testament to DiChiera that the building of the opera company took place during such difficult times historically and economically.

Given DiChiera's growing reputation and stature in the opera community it is no surprise that throughout the years he has been approached with job offers and opportunities. Two of these opportunities came his way in 1974. Considering just these two gives a clear

perspective of his priorities and helps to characterize DiChiera's reputation, which had grown to the point where he was recognized as an operatic authority and as a successful impresario. In January of 1974 he received a letter from the Search Committee for the position of Dean of the College-Conservatory of Music of the University of Cincinnati. The letter states that they were looking for a person of "overriding merit" and that his name "was put in nomination by the University community immediately upon the announcement" (Stein, DiChiera) of their Dean's impending retirement.

By the end of the summer of 1974, DiChiera was considering a very serious offer to be President of the California Institute of the Arts. After completing an extensive interview process that included a detailed review of the school's budget and a three-day visit to the campus DiChiera was faced with a challenging and difficult decision, especially considering that this job would allow him to move back to what had been his hometown. In December of 1974 in an article about the challenges facing the Music Hall Center, the Detroit Free Press reported on his decision:

The town needs the place, say its supporters. People, some anyway, believe in it. DiChiera, for one, does. Two weeks ago he turned down the presidency of the prestigious California Institute of Arts at a salary three times the one he sometimes gets and sometimes doesn't get here, to stay at the Music Hall and keep unreeling the parade of arts and fun. (DeVine, Music)

Despite the appealing and lucrative offers that would come his way DiChiera decided to stay in Michigan. He had a clear understanding of the long-range type of commitment that would have to be made. The job offers were a measure of his stature on the national scene. His decision to stay with MOT was a clear indication of his dedication to his adopted hometown and to his vision of building an institution, a full-time professional regional opera company in Detroit. He was committed to the long haul.

Despite the difficult times DiChiera pressed on and in 1974 he and Michigan Opera Theatre continued the diverse, expanding slate of activities. The 1974-75 Season was expanded to four mainstage operas, the biggest season to date. The second season at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts was at hand, the OPERA America connection continued to grow, the volunteer association was organized, and the administrative team was growing. The first major activity for MOT in 1974 was the new Opera in Residence program.

### **Deep Roots**

From the beginning, when DiChiera took charge of Overture to Opera in 1963, establishing deep roots was always the primary goal. Opera in Residence was a new and exciting program that was designed

to attend to this goal. Building on all the touring that had already taken place, Opera in Residence was called "one of the most forward-reaching arts programs for young people in the United States" (Opera Theatre) by the Kalamazoo Gazette in 1974 and the Dearborn Guide called their experience "a spectacular week of performances, workshops, lectures and assemblies" (Limbacher, Opera). This innovative and extremely popular program was the embodiment of the fundamental spirit of the formative years and as such provides an understanding of the primary through-line and theme in this study. DiChiera described the goal in Opera News at the time as "building an atmosphere for opera in our culture" and talked about "working into the fabric of the communities" (Wadsworth, Motown). These two phrases describe the theme. Opera in Residence exemplifies this spirit and was a very successful and significant strategy for building the atmosphere for opera and working into the fabric of the culture of greater Michigan. As such a relatively detailed study of its first year not only helps gain an understanding of what Opera in Residence was all about but also serves to illustrate a fundamental philosophy.

In the summer of 1971 Managing Director Bob Heuer envisioned the Opera in Residence program and began to organize the initial plans. By the fall several communities showed tentative interest, budgets were drawn up and a proposal was submitted to the National Endowment for

the Arts. Through the winter and into the summer of 1972 discussions continued with community groups as MOT continued its regular school programs. School contacts were told about the upcoming possibilities and the interest was high. In the fall of 1972 the NEA approved the grant for Opera in Residence and everyone agreed that the program should not begin until 1974 to allow for intensive preparation and planning. Through the next year communities that were interested in a residency began to identify themselves and the initial formal meetings between MOT and sponsoring communities began. In the fall of 1973 DiChiera began the casting process so that by January of 1974 the casting was complete and work had begun in earnest on content, material for the program, a teaching guide and other related materials. General press releases were sent out, posters distributed and community fund raising and public relations were well underway.

The first Opera in Residence company included both familiar faces and newcomers to MOT. Veterans Mary Wakefield, Davis Gloff, Nancy Hoover and Christina Lypeckyj were joined by Detroit area performers Arlene Koeing and Dennis Spaight. Also cast were tenor newcomers Robert Johnson and David Hall. Hall's wife, Lynn Wickenden joined the company later after stepping in for Mary Wakefield at one point when she became ill. Stage manager for the company was MOT veteran Raymond Early who had been serving as stage manager at the Music Hall and

Roman Terleckyj was production assistant for the tour which meant he did a little bit of everything including performing and coaching community members on their parts. Christopher Kabala of Ann Arbor and Douglas Murdock of New York provided professional piano accompaniment for each residence activity. By this time Peter Linski, MOT's first Education Director, was also on board as the project's coordinator.

There were five levels of involvement that included a major performance, all school assemblies, lectures, workshops and all kinds of practical involvement. Active participation by city residents was a major ingredient of the workshops and master classes. The main event was the major performance at the end of the week of preparation and for the first year, Donizetti's comic opera *Rita* and Menotti's tense, dramatic opera *The Medium* formed a double bill. They were chosen because they provided exciting contrast and represented two distinct kinds of music theatre. The entire company including singers, stage personnel, accompanists and members of the community were involved with the performance. The full company was also involved in the school assembly program which incorporated scenes, arias, duets and ensembles from a cross-section of operas including *Don Pasquale*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Rigoletto*, *Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme*, *Il Travatore* and *Rita*. The company performed in front of three large projection screens.

Three different ensembles were also available to the communities as part of the outreach program: a Comic Opera Ensemble, a Romantic Opera Ensemble and what was called a Mini-assembly that was intended for school performances. The Comic Opera Ensemble featured two veterans, baritone David Gloff and coloratura soprano Nancy Hoover with Douglas Murdock as accompanist, and the program consisted of music from *Don Pasquale*, *The Barber of Seville*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Così fan Tutti*, and *Rita*. The Romantic Opera Ensemble featured tenor David Hall and his wife mezzo-soprano Lynn Wickenden with accompanist Christopher Kabala in excerpts from *La Bohème*, *Rigoletto*, *Il Travatore* and *Twelfth Night*. These two ensembles performed for a variety of service clubs, women's groups and the local colleges. They were also available to travel to schools to do the Mini-assemblies. All of these activities were designed for groups of over one hundred people. For smaller groups, classroom experiences were offered which included classroom talks, lectures, workshops, voice classes and interviews. Other classes were offered as MOT suggested "Opera in History" for social studies departments, "Opera as Literature" for English departments and design classes for art departments. Initially, there were as many as thirty different classes offered.

Each week's residency culminated in the performance of *Rita* and *The Medium* featuring company members in the principle roles and

community members in the chorus and on the technical crew. The schedule for the 1974 Opera in Residence program was intense. On February 17 company members arrived in Detroit for a week of rehearsals. Beginning February 24 through March 2 the Dearborn Residency took place which included one performance, four assemblies, nine ensemble performances, nine lecture/workshops, and visits to seven schools and three community groups. In all there were an estimated 6,300 people in attendance. After regrouping in Detroit, off they went for a March 2 through March 6 residency in Portage followed by a March 9 through March 16 residency in Kalamazoo. Then it was back to Detroit to regroup once again followed by three days at Wayne Memorial High School, a seven day residency in Traverse City and finally a March 30 through April 6 residency in Flint. Each residency featured a program similar to the one described in Dearborn and, after it was all concluded, MOT's newsletter reported that "more than 40,000 Michigan residents were involved" in the program and that for the next year's residence program they predicted "its expansion to include nine communities and nearly 70,000 people" (Evers, Opera).

This was truly a perfect example of a model of audience building, of building an atmosphere for opera in Michigan culture and of working into the fabric of the community. The highly successful Opera in Residence program was exemplary grass roots, community based

programming. It helped to provide a solid foundation and was a key element in the growth of this company. MOT was indeed sinking deep roots.

The activities at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts were another way of working into the fabric of the community and exposing the MOT name to large diverse groups of people. For MOT to be in the middle of all the activity at the Music Hall was an exceptional public relations and marketing opportunity. The second season at the Music Hall was in full swing:

By the 1974-75 season, there were 160 performances; attendance had jumped 187 percent over the previous season and revenue was up 150 percent. The operating deficit the second season (which was up fifty-nine percent over the previous year), was offset by gifts from more than 500 foundations, corporations, and private citizens. During the 1975-76 season, more than 600 similar sources made gifts. (Philp, Detroit's)

The 1974-75 season was another phenomenal slate of diverse activities. Jazz, theatre, dance and two variety series called Critics Choice and Marvelous Mix offered the widest possible range of performing arts with plenty of star power. At the beginning of this second season, by May of 1974, the Music Hall had already played host to Bobby Short, Count Basie, Buddy Rich, P.D.Q. Bach, the Citizen's Theatre of Glasgow presenting three plays in repertory, Edward Villella and the Joffrey II Ballet Company. These were just the activities which took place before

May; the season continued throughout the year with a wide variety of other events. The Free Press said at the end of the year that while they were still searching for an audience, "one year and 19 weeks into its existence, the Music Hall's range and pure-pleasure level has been extraordinary" (DeVine, Music).

An especially notable part of the 1974-75 season was a production of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. It was the first in a series of events produced by DiChiera and the Music Hall to be part of the wide-ranging variety offered in the center. This was separate and in addition to MOT's mainstage season. *Mass* was given four performances in March of 1975 and was the first major Midwestern production of this powerful musical-theatrical work. It was commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis for the opening of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1971 and had been seen in New York at the Met, in Philadelphia and in Los Angeles. Earl Rivers, who had directed *Mass* in Los Angeles, was brought in to be music director for the Detroit version. He shared the conducting duties with the highly regarded John Doyaras, who at that time was in his ninth year as director of choral activities at Oakland University in Rochester and was long time Minister of Music at Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield Hills. Dominic Missimi of the University of Detroit was stage director and the production featured 138 Detroit area artists. Nationally recognized David Cryer, who was featured

in the premiere production at the Kennedy Center, was cast in the lead role of the Celebrant. Excerpts from a positive review in the Free Press:

Fully 138 people on the "Mass" stage were from the quiescent pool of Detroit talent. A significant side effect came from the work displayed by the several gifted black artists in the show – the brilliant dancers Carol Morriseau and Carl Bailey, singers typified by Ned Wright and members of his Phoenix Singers, or musical actors like Weyman Thompson. (DeVine, Detroit's)

The Detroit News praised the production's "sincerity" and "power" in an all around supportive review that also included a mention of the local talent:

But this review must close with enthusiastic praise for the spirit of the large cast under Dominic Missimi's direction. One somehow takes for granted the fact that Detroit is filled with talented performers, and "Mass" gives us one of our infrequent chances to see a number of them in action. (Carr, Sincerity)

Ecumenical in its source and theme and universal in its message of brotherhood, *Mass* is a celebration of humanity in music, dance and theatre. In that, it is symbolic of what was taking place at the Music Hall in general. It was indeed a celebration of humanity in music, dance and theatre, with DiChiera leading the way. Once again, in the finest tradition of the theatre, he was addressing the most current issues of the day from the stage of the Music Hall, and in a much larger context was making a key contribution to the rebuilding of the city. Working into the fabric of the community, strengthening the bonds of goodwill, DiChiera's intention was to make a positive contribution:

**Mass deals with very human needs, the search for love and personal faith in chaotic times. I accept the challenge of producing such a complex and monumental work with the hope that in some way it may create or strengthen bonds of good will for all of us who experience it. (Music Hall Director)**

**By the end of the 1970s the Music Hall's role became clearer. It would serve to fill whatever voids the city suffered culturally. The Dance Series and the Family Series became mainstays of the theatre's performing arts schedule. The building was available for rental for performing organizations from the greater Detroit area so that local groups could enjoy the professional surroundings and outstanding acoustics in this beautiful theatre.**

**In the fall of 1975 the operations at the Music Hall had grown to the point where DiChiera was able to hire a full time managing director for the Music Hall Center. He selected Manuel Levine, who came to Detroit by way of Pittsburgh's Heinz Hall for the Performing Arts. At this point he had managing director Bob Heuer at MOT and managing director Manuel Levine at the Music Hall as his immediate staff. The 1975-76 season was a milepost for the Center financially and was reported on in the Music Hall newsletter. The quote refers to a story in Variety, the show business newspaper, which had called it their first Million Dollar Season:**

**Variety referred to Music Hall's projected \$1,333,900 operating budget for its 1975-76 season, against its projected income of \$1,099,700 for the period, leaving the non-profit center with a projected**

**operating deficit of \$234,200 for the coming year.  
(Variety Story)**

**New managing director Manuel Levine called the story in Variety "another indication that Music Hall has established itself as a national Performing Arts Center" (Variety Story). Further proof that the Music Hall Center had established itself came in the form of a letter from America's First Lady Betty Ford on July 16, 1975:**

**I am grateful for this opportunity to convey my gratitude and my admiration for the outstanding accomplishments of Music Hall Center.**

**In a nation which reveres its growing cultural heritage, the efforts of Music Hall Center to enhance and encourage involvement with the performing arts are truly to be commended. You have not only enriched the lives of the many people in the Detroit area who have had the opportunity to attend your performances, you have also created for the entire community a spirit of expectation, excitement and appreciation. (Ford, 1975)**

**In the summer of 1977 MOT announced that DiChiera would be stepping aside as executive director of the Music Hall Center in order to devote more time to expanding Michigan Opera Theatre both in Detroit and throughout the state. DiChiera would also be more available to participate in operatic activities on the national level, which was especially important considering his heavy involvement in OPERA America. At the time Mrs. Ruth Glancy, Chairman of the Board of Music Hall Center said:**

**We are deeply indebted to David DiChiera for his vision, dedication, and artistic guidance which have**

made Music Hall Center an integral part of the cultural life of Detroit, and we look forward to the continued benefit of his experience. MOT's planned expansion is especially exciting for Music Hall since the opera was a major catalyst for the Center's evolution and is a cornerstone of our endeavors. (Glancy, David)

DiChiera was named Founding Director and elected to the Music Hall Board of Directors, a position he holds to this day. The Music Hall went through an ambitious restoration program that was in its final phase in 1980. A new roof, new plumbing and electrical improvements were installed and the exterior work on the facade was complete. The final effort was a total restoration of the interior decor. The theatre is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and continues to be a viable venue for the performing arts in Detroit.

### **1974 – A Turning Point**

Despite the challenges MOT continued to grow steadily. The ten year period between 1974 and 1984 was one that saw continued growth in all three primary areas: aesthetics, economics and community programs. The decade was especially notable for the artistic growth of the company. It was a decade where MOT's aesthetic philosophy would come into focus and is an era full of artistic highlights. Casting included both world famous stars and young artists on the rise; the list of singers who got their start with MOT is truly impressive. The repertory included

mainstays from the canon along with rarely performed works and there was a strategy of presenting rarely heard ethnic operas that appealed specifically to communities in and around metro Detroit. It was a diverse and exciting slate of activities that was carefully chosen, always keeping the audience and other practical concerns in mind. DiChiera recalled:

Each year I try to come up with a season that does many things. I'm always torn, because there are a lot of unknown operas I would like to do. But we are dependent on audience support, and I always feel you have to lead audiences carefully. So I try to balance things, never forgetting that it could be economically disastrous if the audience suddenly decided the repertory chosen was too esoteric. I think their willingness now to subscribe to a whole season says they have faith, that they're interested in what we're doing.

I'm very much interested in theater; I never think of opera as an isolated phenomenon. But I'm one of those people who feel there's never any hard-and-fast rule for anything. The marvelous creativity about theater is that the variety of interpretations possible indicates the variety of experiences you can have with the same work (Wadsworth, Motown).

Eclectic, diverse programming including American opera and music theatre, accessibility, using international stars and up and coming talent, presenting operas as vital theatre and in English, touring, Opera in Residence; all of these strategies were in full swing from 1974 to 1984. It was to be a decade of great success leading to the point where Michigan Opera Theatre was the recognized, full-time professional regional opera company in Detroit and greater Michigan. Through all the activity

DiChiera and his company were able to create an atmosphere for opera, building a sizeable audience along the way. Opera News reported on DiChiera and what was happening at the Music Hall Center:

The Center now gives the broken city of Detroit a performing arts program of quality and variety. "We're working very hard at that. I think we've developed a shrewd kind of sociological mix. The audiences for Michigan Opera Theatre are definitely not simply characterized by mink. We do have friends in that category, because they of course are the ones who help make it possible, but our opening night audiences have been a mixture of black tie, Levi's and Borsalinos." (Wadsworth, Motown)

Breathing life into this grand old theatre, making it an active and high quality center for the performing arts was also historically significant in the larger picture in that it was almost literally the first positive step in the rebuilding of Detroit's theatre and entertainment district. A seed was planted in the Fall of 1971 at the Music Hall and by the turn of the century this area of Detroit was poised to become one of the largest theatre and entertainment districts in the country including world-class theatres, a renovated and expanded Orchestra Hall as the home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, restaurants, nightclubs, two major sports stadiums and MOT's final destination, the Detroit Opera House. It is a testament to DiChiera who brought "a blend of scholarship, care, discipline and creativity that has rewarded his patient, almost missionary, work with success" (Wadsworth, Motown).

DiChiera once described the production of *Boris Godunov* in the 1974-75 season as one which in his mind "reflected a turning point in the company's potential" (MOT 1976-77). Looking back the entire season can be seen as reflecting a turning point in MOT's potential. This 1974-75 season was the first to be expanded to four mainstage productions, which featured the high profile and very successful production of *Boris Godunov* featuring world renowned Jerome Hines in the title role. The season included six performances each of *La Traviata*, *Boris Godunov*, *The Elixir of Love* and *Die Fledermaus*. Also included were tour productions of *La Traviata* in Kalamazoo and Lansing and of *Boris Godunov* in Flint. The season also included the expanded Opera in Residence program, with that year's production of *The Barber of Seville* slated for nine communities around the state. The related activities also continued and there was an MOT performance at the inauguration of Governor William Milliken in Lansing (also featured were the DSO and Interlochen Arts Academy) and an arrangement with Wayne State University's WDET-FM to broadcast MOT productions on Sundays in the spring. It should also be noted that at the beginning of the season DiChiera was able to announce very special plans for a world premiere of an opera written especially for MOT by a major American composer for the upcoming 1976-77 season. The excitement was building as MOT was

indeed at a turning point, prepared to move up to the next level. The Free Press stated it plainly: "Detroiters need no longer go to New York, Chicago or San Francisco to see and hear top notch opera. Musically speaking, this company has placed the Motor City on the operatic map" (Alexander, Opera). A very supportive statement indeed, and while MOT was certainly not at the level of New York, Chicago and San Francisco yet, it was clear from this most ambitious season that DiChiera was making the dream come true and that MOT was not to be ignored as a legitimate presence in the opera world.

Detroit Mayor Coleman Young declared October 4-12, 1974 Michigan Opera Theatre Week coinciding with the dates of the first opera of the season. There was a presentation in the Detroit Mayoral Conference Room covered by the media which included Mayor Young, Lynn Townsend, DiChiera, MOT volunteer Jessie Mann and the cast of *La Traviata*. The report in the MOT newsletter said of the event: "The signing of this proclamation recognized MOT as one of the city's prized assets, as well as its being one of the six major cultural institutions in the state, and the Mayor urged 'full community support of this undertaking' of presenting opera to Detroiters" (Michigan Opera Theatre Week). The report referred to a big step for the company. Earlier in 1974 MOT was named by the state of Michigan as one of its six major cultural institutions; the others were the Detroit Symphony, the Detroit Institute of Arts,

Meadow Brook, Cranbrook and Interlocken. As reported in the MOT newsletter, along with this prestigious designation came a much needed grant from the state: "Concurrent with that designation was a state appropriation of \$108,000 earmarked for the Opera in Residence program and for general operation" (Contribution Campaign). There was widespread recognition of what DiChiera and MOT were accomplishing and in many cases it paid off in direct financial support.

Opening the 1974-75 season was MOT's first *La Traviata* and the production was in good hands. Dennis Burkh was contracted as music director and conductor and Roy Lazarus as stage director. Both had impressive credentials. Burkh had served as an assistant conductor at the Stuttgart State Opera and at La Scala and had conducted all around the world. Lazarus had come to national attention after his directorial debut at the Juilliard School. He was formerly a leading basso with the New York City Opera and Santa Fe Opera and had been on the faculties of the Juilliard School, Indiana University and the Oberlin Conservatory of Music where he founded and directed the well-known Oberlin Music Theatre.

The cast included both familiar faces and newcomers including MOT veterans Jan Albright, Davis Gloff, Edward Kingins, and Michael Ingham along with leading Met baritone William Walker and emerging tenor talent, 22-year-old James Schwisow. To sing the role of Violetta

was to be New York City Opera veteran Diana Soviero alternating with another New York City Opera soprano Syble Young. Once again problems arose as Soviero had to bow out at the last minute due to illness. Syble Young was ready, willing and as it turned out very able to take over and the production earned very positive reviews. "Young singers triumph in opera season start" (Meredith, Young) was the headline in the Windsor Star. While the Detroit News, in a generally favorable review, complained about Mr. Schwisow's lack of stage presence, there was complete agreement among the critics about his singing and about Syble Young's performance as well. From the Windsor Star:

His voice is powerful and far-ranging. So it was that the opening night audience was moved to frequent bravos and an emotional curtain call.

Miss Young has the fairness of face and a rich, sweet yet powerful voice that made her delineation of the dying courtesan one of dramatic power. A slight, understandable nervous tension in the opening scenes was quickly dissipated as the opera progressed. It is doubtful if the part of Violetta could have been portrayed with greater artistry and sense of delicate beauty that Syble Young gave it. (Meredith, Young)

The Kalamazoo Gazette called it a "Solid Production" and stated:

"Detroit's Michigan Opera Theater, which deserves all the support that can be mustered by opera lovers in the state, has done a good job with the spirit of the work" (Heintz, Solid).

During the run of *La Traviata*, a delightful feature on MOT veteran Jan Albright appeared in the Detroit News. The article reported on the diverse career of this popular soprano calling her a "cheerful redhead" and describing the challenges of trying to have a career while raising children and managing a family. One part of the article is particularly notable in that it reflects on the personality and the heart of MOT. While being teased by the interviewer about performers being egotists she made the following statement: "Any performer cares about himself and the image he projects, so of course we are all egotists. But the kind we do NOT have here (in MOT) is the malicious kind. There's not one prima donna and we've never had a temperamental conductor" (Hoover, Meet). It is a measure of DiChiera's leadership, his style and his personality that the company would evolve in this way. He has always encouraged members of the company to be part of a family, with a personal stake in the outcome and has been a genius in his ability to get people to work together toward a common goal of excellence.

Next up was *Boris Godunov*. DiChiera was quoted: "It is the most ambitious thing we have ever done" (Smith, P.S. 1974). Full-time volunteer Phyllis Snow also described the challenge in the Flint Journal:

"Every aspect of this opera production was monumental," said volunteer worker Phyllis Snow. "I can't think of anything that was easy."

Mrs. Snow had much of the responsibility for keeping tabs on the 105-member cast. She watched a

cooperative effort grow from near-chaos in the early rehearsals. That number, for the statistically minded, breaks down into 15 principals, 42 chorus members, two groups of supernumeraries (24 regulars and 12 extras per performance) and 12 children. (Harvey, Boris)

DiChiera's approach for this production was to use the original scoring by the composer Modeste Mussorgsky. The opera is most often done using Rimsky-Korsakoff's reworking of the score. Shostakovich also did a treatment but DiChiera had decided on the original and not the more opulent, conventional versions:

In place of the usual iconographic spectacular we got an intimate chamber opera about the Russian Macbeth. Mussorgsky's scoring is far more austere and harmonically daring than Rimsky-Korsakoff's. And Mussorgsky's original setting of seven scenes from Pushkin makes more sense dramatically. Yet, fascinating as it was to hear "Boris" with the encrustations stripped away, it wasn't a complete victory for authenticity: We hear the instruments Mussorgsky had in mind, but this was an English-language production. That meant it lacked a certain authentic flavor and sound. (Carr, Mussorgsky's)

Jay Carr of the Detroit News was the most persistent critic of performing the operas in English. Melvin Strauss, who had been brought in from Seattle to be music director and conductor for this production, provided a well thought out response to the criticism. He spoke seriously and convincingly supporting the use of English translations:

Performing opera in its original language is o.k. if that language is the language of the country in which the performance is taking place. Otherwise it is pure snobbishness. Doing opera in the States in English isn't

even a debatable question anymore. I thought it had been settled 25 years ago. . . I'm amazed that it still goes on. Doing opera in the original language is an academic, pedantic principle that doesn't make sense. How involved could a cast like the one in this 'Boris' production be, for instance, if they didn't understand a word they were saying?

The Seattle Opera, on the other hand, settles the controversy by doing the opera in both the original language and English at different performances. (Smith, P.S. 1974)

Jerome Hines, who was considered the worlds leading interpreter of the role of Boris, knew the role in Italian, Russian and English and had performed it in all three languages within a thirty day period at one point in his career. He spoke in the Flint Journal about Opera in translation:

Hines is all for it, but he is a stickler for quality. Nothing irritates him more in an English translation than misplaced accents.

"The translator has to have the same genius as the composer. He has to be a consummate musician and a great literary man. That's why most translations are not good." But the effort should be made, nonetheless: "Why should you miss all the fun of a comic opera and the poignancy of a tragic opera? " Hines asked. (Harvey, Basso)

The debate raged on until 1983 when John Leberg, who was director of operations for the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto, working with Canadian Opera general director Lofti Mansouri, came up with the idea of English-language "supertitles." He had been watching opera on television with English subtitles and simply applied a measure of common sense. What evolved was a system of projecting the words onto

a small screen above the proscenium so the spectator could easily glance up and read the translation. MOT had begun to follow Seattle's lead in the late 1970s and was producing opera both in English and in the original language. In 1984 MOT was the first midwestern opera company to begin using supertitles, which came to be called surtitles. At this writing, they are employed worldwide. Until surtitles, however, DiChiera held fast to the philosophy of doing productions in English. He was committed to accessibility, to building an audience and to bringing opera to all the people even if it meant enduring the contempt of certain critics.

For this 1974 production of *Boris Godunov* DiChiera contracted Frank Rizzo as stage director. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship between MOT and this important stage director. He would return to MOT many times over the years and is a trusted colleague and friend to DiChiera and this opera company. He studied at the Yale School of Drama, was an apprentice in production at the Santa Fe Opera and then became the personal assistant to Gian Carlo Menotti. In 1967 he was appointed director of the American sector of the Spoleto Festival of Two Worlds. He later became artistic administrator of the Wolf Trap Foundation, contributed many articles to *Opera News* and is still directing opera at MOT and around the world at this writing. At the same time Rizzo reflected on the idea of collaboration in the theatre: "The only reason anything worked in the production was because of collaboration,

musically as well as in the production end. You can sit home and listen to the music and dream, but it takes real cooperation to put it all together into a workable package" (Smith, P.S. 1974). It is a testament to Rizzo's skills as a director and DiChiera's skills as an impresario that such a positive working environment could be achieved.

The critical response to this production of *Boris Godunov* was almost all positive. The Detroit News had a mixed reaction and said that despite the fact that his "bass voice has that luxuriant black velvet quality seldom heard outside of Russia," Hines "settled for stock gestures and an essentially superficial interpretation." The review went on to say that "one can't help but root for an effort as enterprising as this one. But the performance should have been more powerful" (Carr, Mussorgsky's).

All of the other reviews were positive and supportive. "Gutsy Godunov stuns MOT audience" (Reynolds, Gutsy) said the Observer & Eccentric newspapers. The Windsor Star proclaimed "Hines is Powerful as Boris Godunov" and said that the production was "fully enhanced by powerful singing, and physical performance by the Metropolitan Opera's Jerome Hines in the title role" (Meredith, Hines). The Flint Journal ran the headline "Hines sings 'favorite role' with concentrated devotion" and the following are excerpts from the review:

Hines found the right balance between the sonorously lyrical and the shouting, panting aspects of the character in his more excited moments. The voice

showed its age only on the very top with a bit of a wobble. Otherwise, it was truly projected and masterfully used.

These and other individual successes onstage were considerably aided, of course, by the skill and imagination of conductor Strauss and stage director Frank Rizzo.

The other important ensemble was the MOT chorus, larger than ever before, for his production. Trained by Raynold Allvin, it had a sturdy, well-balanced sound enlivened by a truly mob-like expressiveness. (Harvey, Hines)

Finally, the Free Press summed up the prevailing feeling with the headline, "Opera Theatre Shows It Can Handle A Tall Order" (George, Opera).

The MOT chorus under the direction of Raynold Allvin had indeed come into its own by this time and established itself as a top notch, reliable chorus. For the 1974-75 season the group included forty-eight newcomers and twenty-four returning choristers, making up the largest chorus ever assembled by MOT. They would continue to make a positive contribution to MOT productions and after a challenging period where the chorus would grow in stature to the point where they could handle the full range of repertoire expected of a major opera chorus, they would earn consistently excellent reviews for their efforts. The chorus had developed to the point where they participated in other, non-MOT related activities. As an example of this the group made several appearances as the Official Chorus of the City of Detroit during the 1974-75 season, partially

sponsored in this capacity by Detroit Parks and Recreation. These kinds of activities were always inherently great marketing for the opera company, keeping the MOT name active and in front of as many people as possible. In 1974 the chorus began the Julie Cordes Memorial Scholarship in honor of chorus member Julie Cordes who had died in a fatal auto accident the year before. The scholarship consisted of theory and performance classes at Oakland University and performance with the MOT chorus in all productions of the current season. Over the years MOT's chorus became affiliated with the American Guild of Musical Artists and continues to be an excellent and reliable ensemble to this day.

The 1974-75 season continued with a January run of Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love*. It was an especially different, stylized version of this well known opera as stage director James deBlasis brought a concept that he had developed as General Director of the Cincinnati Opera. He was quoted in the Detroit Free Press:

I wrote an article called 'Mounting a Horse Opera' explaining how I thought the opera could become an Old West melodrama. Six reviewers from New York came to Cincinnati for the opening, and all six told me before the show that they thought I was crazy. After the show, they said it was a smash. (Brown, How)

In deBlasis' version a tale of old Italy becomes a story of the Texas panhandle. Dulcamara who originally is a quack doctor becomes a traveling medicine man; Adina, a farm owner, becomes a rancher's

daughter; Belcore, the army sergeant becomes a cavalry sergeant and Nemorino, a poor peasant, becomes a love-sick cowboy. These characters are all comic opera types and deBlasis had a notion to reset the opera in a more modern idiom, like that of *Oklahoma!* It was to be a Wild West "Elixir" and it made for great publicity with plenty of marketing potential. It was quite a change of pace after *Boris Gudonov* as MOT continued to try and present the widest range of repertoire.

The critical response was decidedly mixed. The Detroit News said: "There is no question that we were deep in the heart of something, perhaps travesty" (Carr, Eloquent). The Flint Journal also objected, arguing: "It's a lesson a stage director should learn in school: Don't pile humor on top of humor." It is a point very well taken; a concept like this one is very tricky business. The Flint Journal continued on this point:

The frequent mock-melodramatic tableaux, the stylized mugging and the continual intrusive stage business undercut many effects that the music carries quite well without help. deBlasis apparently thought that the unrealistic nature of the comedy would permit the piling-on of every trick in the book. (Harvey, Director)

Other critical response was much more positive. A concept production like this one is bound to stir up a lot of debate. Creating a buzz like this is essentially a positive thing as far as marketing is concerned. It was a daring programming choice that turned out to be a popular one as well. Several reviews reflected this positive reception.

The Eccentric Newspaper called it "one hoedown of a good time" and went on to say:

From deBlasis' ingenious and often innovative staging to a gallery of superior singing actors, through the hand-clapping, foot-stomping chorus and right down to the delightful sets and perfect stage props, "Elixir of Love" is an absolute confection of entertainment.  
(Reynolds, Laughs)

Wayne State's newspaper the South End also gave the production high marks saying, "the most enjoyable thing about this production is the warmth and fun of the cast. Their enthusiasm and vivaciousness adds to the audience's enjoyment." The South End also summarized the response to the singing, which was almost uniformly positive among the critics:

It's amazing that the chorus can hold its many poses without even cracking a smile. This still-life form tends to give the proceedings an amusing comic-strip quality.

The singing is all top-notch. Linda Cook in the soprano role of Adina is beautiful and beguiling. She sings exquisitely with fickle abandon of passionate love. William McDonald as Nemorino is a perfect picture of a love-sick cow poke. He exhibits a flair for comedy as he sings an aria perched on an overturned bucket and his drunken stagger brings laughter to the audience.

Forrest Lorey as the conceited Sergeant, Belcore, has just the right amount of swagger and charm. His rich baritone voice blends perfectly with McDonald in a melodious duet as he cajoles the hesitant Nemorino into signing up with his regiment.

But the real show stealer is Andrew Foldi as the quack doctor Dulcamara. His deep bass voice provides rich contrast to Adina's light and lyric soprano in their wedding feast duet. (Persinger, Bright)

The Free Press reported that it was "A Fitting New Look," and that the production "seems to fit its new setting perfectly." The Free Press also noted the audience response saying that a nearly full theatre "enjoyed it and gave the entire cast enthusiastic cheers and applause" (George, Cowboy).

"Michigan Opera Theatre concluded its season with an elaborate and stunning production of *Die Fledermaus*" (Persinger, Faxon). This was the way the South End described MOT's final offering of the 1974-75 season. DiChiera put together a stellar cast of Detroit area professionals and the results were almost completely positive. Veterans Catherine Chistensen, Jan Albright, Davis Gloff, Edward Kingens and Charles Roe were joined by Joel Kyle Ebersole who was chairman of the Music Department at Mercy College. Also cast were Cheryl Stewart from Western Michigan University, Sally Wylie of the University of Michigan and Gene A. Wabeke who was a music teacher in the Livonia Public Schools. DiChiera continued to make good on his pledge to give local area talent a chance to perform.

DiChiera found a way to generate a publicity buzz for this production by casting State Senator Jack Faxon in the part of Prince Orlofsky. The popular Detroit politician was a well-known personality and the news of his operatic debut was in all the newspapers. DiChiera

explained in the Detroit News that the role was "often done by guest actors or personalities" and the News went on to explain that DiChiera "thinks that Faxon's appearance in the role will help dispel the belief of many people that opera is inaccessible and stuffy" (Butcher, Singing). While the production earned a positive response from the critics, the opinions regarding Faxon's performance varied widely:

The role of the party-giving Russian aristocrat was taken by State Senator Jack Faxon. A legend in Lansing, he's a born performer, and it was inevitable that he should turn up on a stage somewhere. DiChiera describes his voice as a limited baritone. DiChiera is a diplomat. Still, Faxon's delight in his own performance was infectious. (Carr, 'Fledermaus')

Not everyone thought it was "infectious." The South End was most disappointed saying "Faxon was in no way, shape or form up to the role" and that "not only could he not sing, he couldn't talk in time with the music" (Persinger, Faxon). The disagreement continued with Eccentric newspapers calling it "a very bad performance" (Reynolds, Fledermaus) and the Free Press saying that Faxon proved himself "a competent actor if no great shakes as a singer" (George, Troupe). DiChiera had scored a public relations victory, as the audiences for the most part were entertained: "the man couldn't act or sing but the audience loved him anyway" (Meredith, Fledermaus). Also, as a relatively hot topic around town, using Faxon kept the MOT name at a high profile, which was of course, a very good thing for the company. The Free Press summarized

the general critical response reporting that the production had "the same thoroughly professional spirit, which has marked all of the company's presentations." Other highlights from the review include:

The opera is joyous Viennese farce and the entire company entered into its spirit of fun. The comedy was played a bit broadly but occasionally rose to the point of real hilarity. Jan Albright as the pert chambermaid who steals off to a masquerade party to seek fame and fortune was in especially fine voice.

Edward Kingins, who has sung many roles expertly with this company, was delightful as Alfred. David Banberger, as director, was responsible for the fast-paced action on the stage and Thomas Booth, conducting members of the Flint Symphony Orchestra, shaped the entire performance beautifully. (George, Troupe)

There are five other areas of which to make note at the end of this turning point season; the one act opera *Vigilence*, the practice of opera companies loaning and renting scenery to each other and through OPERA America, the contributions of Jim Segadi, the developments regarding the MOT orchestra and the opera company's economic state of affairs.

Karen DiChiera's talents for composition continued to flower and on May 7, 1975 *Vigilence*, a children's one act opera she composed, had its premiere featuring the fifth graders of Pembroke School in Troy. She teamed up once again with her friend Joan Hill who contributed the libretto. The opera is set in Civil War times and centers around a Detroit family whose home is an underground railroad station for runaway slaves.

*Vigilance* was performed several times that spring, including a run in the elementary schools of the Auburn Hills Avondale School District May 27, 28 and 30. George Gilchrist, one of the teachers in Avondale, who had taken his students to the opera in Detroit, and had a very positive response to their experience with *Vigilance* was quoted in the Oakland Press:

The study of the libretto itself is a complete unit on the underground railroad. It's difficult to find quality elementary level productions. "Vigilance" has a musical quality which fascinates children. It has the echoes of a classical touch and the flair of the contemporary.

Mrs. DiChiera and Mrs. Hill have made possible through the writing of the opera, a true understanding of opera, theater and history in an exciting experimental encounter for the elementary school child. (Stolicker, Schoolhouse)

The production practice of opera companies collaborating on sets and scenery in creative ways was fast becoming the fact of life in the opera world. It was a practice which evolved out of necessity, considering the high cost of producing opera, the absence of government support and an economy that was sinking fast. It was a matter of survival. The concept of loaning and renting scenery and the strategy of co-productions that could be shared between companies are practices that quickly became widespread. At the time the Flint Journal called it "the kind of thing the current poverty of opera companies makes necessary" (Harvey, *Traviata*).

MOT and DiChiera, especially by virtue of his leadership position in OPERA America, were on the vanguard of this trend. The previous year MOT rented the *Rigoletto* scenery from the Seattle Opera Company, the *Madame Butterfly* scenery was on loan from OPERA America and *The Merry Widow* scenery was rented from the Skylight Opera Company in Milwaukee. Jay Carr reported on the practice in the Detroit News:

Opera companies have worked together, but never on this widespread and well-organized a scale. This co-op has also been able to do things that no single group could do. Money is, of course, behind this new surge of cooperation. Or, rather, lack of money. Take the "Traviata" sets. Michigan Opera Theatre general director David DiChiera estimates that it would cost \$30,000 to build those "Traviata" sets today. The cost for rental, transportation and refurbishing will come to something like \$7,500. "It's the only way to go, given the cost of materials and labor, " says DiChiera. (Carr, Opera goes)

The increased cooperation between opera companies was to make a tremendous difference and is still the prevalent practice today, almost thirty years later.

In a related facet of MOT's growth this study continues to trace and highlight volunteer contributions. Jim Segadi is another in the long line of reliable, stalwart volunteers. His selfless efforts on behalf of MOT exemplify a volunteer spirit, without which the opera company would simply not have been able to establish itself. He willingly and enthusiastically took on whatever needed to be done. By 1974 Segadi

was immersed in service to MOT and continues this service to the present time. A vice-president and general manager of a family-owned business which made machinery to manufacture tractors, Segadi began his volunteer activities in 1969 when he answered an ad for people to talk to school children about opera. That year he visited twenty schools. His many contributions include everything from typing address labels to building and transporting sets, an activity he repeated many times using his own truck. He was instrumental in getting the Music Hall reopened and is credited with renovating the orchestra pit and rebuilding dressing rooms. Segadi has also performed in many operas in the chorus or as an extra but he is probably most well known as the Brownie Man: "One night David [DiChiera] brought a cake down to the cast. When I saw how much it was appreciated I decided to bring brownies" (Breitmeyer, bakes). He became a familiar sight at MOT performances and rehearsals, bringing trays of homemade goodies and pots of coffee and tea for the cast and the stagehands. It was an activity which he repeated countless times over the years. He is still involved to this day. Segadi was quoted in the Detroit News: "To me working at Music Hall is relaxation. I can work ten hours at the plant and walk into Music Hall and work half the night and go away refreshed. Music is the best investment I ever made in my life" (Breitmeyer, bakes). This enthusiastic volunteer spirit, born of a sense of community service, made an almost incalculable contribution to the

development of MOT as a major regional opera company. Segadi exemplified the kind of heartfelt volunteerism that must be tapped if an opera company, or any arts organization, expects to become an integral part of its community.

In the summer of 1974, a report in the Flint Journal signaled a major change for the MOT Orchestra with the headline "Detroit opera company drops Flint Symphony." The article went on to say that there was a "feeling that a Detroit musical organization should be using Detroit musicians" (Detroit opera). Indeed the connection between MOT and the Flint Symphony had been based on the friendship of DiChiera and the late William Byrd. Byrd's death had loosened the connection considerably and the time had come to begin the process of developing a true Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra. The process took two seasons to complete. For the 1976-77 season DiChiera contracted the Michigan Chamber Orchestra. For the 1977-78 season two developments took place, one being that DiChiera contracted an ensemble known as Orchestra Detroit to play the season and the other development was the arrival of Mark D. Flint for a tenure as staff music director for MOT. This began a relationship between Flint and MOT which continues to this day with Flint returning to conduct frequently over the years.

Mark Flint would prove to be a reliable friend and colleague. He came to MOT with experience as a vocal coach, conductor, singer and

stage director for the opera companies of Lake George, Chautauqua, Pittsburgh and Graz, Austria. At the time he was on the faculty of the University of West Virginia and the Cincinnati College - Conservatory of Music. Along with music directing and conducting duties he would assist DiChiera in establishing the first MOT Orchestra.

The time had come and for the 1978-79 season DiChiera was ready to announce the debut of the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra as a major step forward in the company's artistic evolution. For the first year the concertmaster was Peruz Zerounian, the personnel manager was John Dion and Mark Flint was on the podium to conduct the orchestra's first two productions, Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* and the company's first mainstage production of an American musical, *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II. The MOT Orchestra has gone on to be a reliable and respected ensemble and is affiliated with the Detroit Federation of Musicians, Local #5 of the American Federation of Musicians.

### **1975 - The Challenge**

Michigan Opera Theatre's financial state of affairs was reported in the spring of 1975 in the company's newsletter by Phyllis Snow. In the fall of 1970 the Overture to Opera Committee was formed and it evolved into the MOT Board of Directors, which was incorporated in 1974. The first

and foremost task of the Board was (and remains) to raise the necessary funds to establish a firm financial base from which to operate and to assure the company's future by providing solid economic footing. MOT was, at the time, in the midst of a tremendous growth period:

In the five years of its existence, MOT's budget has increased nearly tenfold, approaching this year the half-million dollar mark. This is growth almost unprecedented in the opera business, and indeed is astonishing, even in a general business comparison. The percentage of contributed income, however, has not increased tenfold to mirror the growth of the company's budget. (The projected individual and corporate support figure is under \$50,000, or approximately one-tenth of the budget for the coming season). The number of contributions has increased dramatically from that first season, however, and now approaches 1,000, and this is very encouraging. (Contribution Campaign)

Even more funds were needed to offset the operating deficit which was caused by the fact that ticket income and performance fees covered just over one-half of the costs. The ticket sales were being handled by an exemplary 1975-76 Season Ticket Campaign. Mrs. George Romney, who had opened her home to one hundred enthusiastic opera supporters from all over the metropolitan area, hosted the kick-off of this campaign. Among other ideas, the company had applied for grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the State of Michigan with some success. A big step forward took place the previous season with MOT being named one of Michigan's six major cultural institutions. With that

designation came a state appropriation which was intended for the Opera in Residence program and for operating funds.

The forecast for the 1975-76 season was not as optimistic as the board had hoped due to the uncertainty of continued state support and the poor condition of the economy. Even though the 1975-76 budget did include a sizeable grant from the State (equal to the previous year), because of increasing costs this grant would have to be used to cover operating expenses. Additional funding would have to be found to allow for the Opera in Residence program. Continued growth for the company, on top of paying the bills, would be a tremendous challenge. The continual need to encourage and increase individual, corporate and foundation support was critical, not only for its obvious financial reasons but also because it has an additional benefit. In order to hope for continued government support, both state and federal, MOT would have to show that the company was strongly supported by the people of Detroit and Michigan, as reflected by their contributions to MOT. A high level of quality had been established and DiChiera's presence and his dedication to the future of MOT was a promise of continued quality at a high artistic level. The challenge for MOT's Board of Directors was clear:

**Michigan Opera Theatre is answering the challenge of young American artists who need opportunities to perform in this country, freeing them from necessity of going to Europe to establish their careers. Michigan Opera Theatre is answering the**

challenge of our city, to provide the kind of cultural institution which will draw people to its center and result in a true renaissance. Michigan Opera Theatre is answering the challenge of history, which measures a civilization not by its industry and finance, but by its culture and the quality of the lives of its people.

Let us answer the challenge of Michigan Opera Theatre. (Contribution Campaign)

It is a true measure of the Board's success that MOT has continued to thrive and grow throughout the years. The MOT Board of Directors provided a perfect example of citizen initiative working through private enterprise. It is part of MOT's legacy that the company would achieve a significant leadership role in the regional opera company movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century with a strong and dedicated Board and DiChiera at the helm. The leadership role was reflected in both aesthetic and economic terms. Jerome Hines captured the sentiment in a statement he made during the highly successful run of *Boris Gudonov* the previous season: "The hope is companies like yours. They will become the real backbone of opera in this country" (Harvey, Basso).

The 1975-76 season was billed as the Season of the Sopranos. DiChiera was able to contract five major rising stars to be featured in the four upcoming operas. Opening the season in October was Gershwin's classic *Porgy and Bess*, Michigan Opera Theatre's first salute to the upcoming Bicentennial celebration. Starring in the production was a twenty-four year old Leona Mitchell. Already on a fast track, Mitchell had

performed with the Houston Grand Opera and the San Francisco Opera. Her most recent success had been as Bess with the Los Angeles Music Center and she had been selected to sing Bess in the first full-length recording of *Porgy and Bess* with Lorin Maazel and the Cleveland Orchestra. Following her Detroit engagement she went on to make her debut with the Strasbourg Opera in France, the Geneva Opera in Switzerland and at the Metropolitan Opera singing Micaela in *Carmen*.

MOT's second production, *La Boheme*, featured Metropolitan Opera auditions winner Marianna Christos as Mimi. She had spent two summers with the Santa Fe Opera and had just made her New York City Opera debut as Liu in *Turandot*. Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* was the third opera of the season and it featured yet another major rising star, Catherine Malfitano in the title role. The twenty-seven year old soprano, who was on the roster of New York City Opera, had made her professional debut in 1972 and had sung with companies of Santa Fe, Wolf Trap, Washington D. C., Houston and Chicago and was looking forward to an upcoming Covent Garden debut. Malfitano, who was the subject of a recent (March 8, 1975) Opera News feature article, also had the distinction of having two major contemporary composers, Carlisle Floyd and Thomas Pasatieri, writing operas featuring her in the lead role. DiChiera and Pasatieri had already selected her for the upcoming MOT

world premiere of *Washington Square* and DiChiera felt it would be a good idea to introduce her in the season before that historic production.

Finally, the last opera of the season, *The Barber of Seville*, featured two more outstanding young artists, mezzo-soprano Brenda Boozer and soprano Kathleen Battle alternating in the role of Rosina. Boozer was a recent winner of the Metropolitan Opera Regional Auditions and had performed with, among others, the opera companies of Santa Fe, Los Angeles and San Francisco. She was also a dancer studying with Martha Graham, had made guest appearances on the Mike Douglas and Merv Griffin television shows and had recently made her New York debut at Avery Fisher Hall. Alternating with Boozer was a young Kathleen Battle who had graduated from the College Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati. She was the 1975 winner of the Young Artist Auditions of the Federation of Music Clubs and had just performed *Treemonisha* on Broadway. Rosina would be her professional operatic debut.

DiChiera was making good on the strategy of providing a forum for major American talent on the rise. Add to all of this an Opera in Residence production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* featuring the outstanding MOT veteran Jan Albright in the title role and the phrase "Season of the Sopranos" becomes much more than a marketing idea. DiChiera had assembled a stunning slate of six outstanding sopranos and was bringing MOT audiences, arguably, some of the finest young voices in America.

The season was almost a complete success and the reviews were basically positive and supportive.

The production of *Porgy and Bess* was particularly notable for several reasons. It is, of course, a vital, exciting opera. As part of the Bicentennial celebration and as an opportunity for local African American singers to perform, it also became a civic phenomenon of major proportions. After the positive experience using local singers in Bernstein's *Mass*, DiChiera decided to tap the local talent once again. DiChiera was quoted in an article in the *Detroit News* which also reported that over four hundred African American hopefuls had turned out for the auditions: "That production convinced us that there was an awful lot of talent in this city" (Greene, 400). There was such a terrific buzz generated about this production and ticket demand was so great that five performances were added to the schedule for a total of ten performances at the Music Hall. In addition there was a full performance at the Power Center in Ann Arbor as part of the University Musical Society's slate of activities. There was also a special Bicentennial celebration performance called "Porgy in the Park" in Kennedy Square featuring songs and readings from the opera along with favorite American music and spirituals. Joyce Garrett, director of the Detroit Bicentennial Commission, who was honorary chairman of all festivities surrounding MOT's 1975 opening night, was on hand to greet the cast and to represent the city of

Detroit in supporting this popular production. As an example of the widespread support, DiChiera received a letter of congratulations from the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce. "The cast, the production, the direction, the music and the performance were all superb," the letter proclaimed. It went on to say: "All Detroiters should be proud of *Porgy and Bess*, the Michigan Opera Theatre and the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts" (Bassett, DiChiera).

For this production DiChiera was able to contract Ella Gerber as stage director. Gerber was very well known around the world for her association with *Porgy and Bess*. In all she had directed twenty different productions of "Porgy" including the New York City Center Opera production. Her extensive travels with this opera had also taken her to Israel, Portugal, New Zealand and Australia. A New York native, Gerber was a strict, disciplined director. She was quoted in the Free Press: "I'm very demanding. Discipline is the basis of theatre." She went on to report enthusiastically about all the talent she found in Detroit: "These are marvelous people. I've rarely found so many talented and eager people in one place. I hope they start a black opera theatre here" (Brown, They'll). Once again DiChiera had contracted the perfect person for the job. The critical response confirmed this and the Flint Journal summarized: "Director Ella Gerber is a veteran of staging *Porgy and*

*Bess*, and her sure hand was evident throughout the performance" (Harvey, Vitality).

The rest of the critical response was supportive. Opera News reported that while the production "needed a couple of performances to right itself," by the third performance the production was "moving fluidly." Opera News went on to report that Leona Mitchell's "tones had size and luster, and her production was secure. She was a formidable Bess" (Carr, Detroit 1975). The Macomb Daily called it "A resplendent *Porgy and Bess*" (Miller, resplendent) and Wayne State's South End called it "Potent and Beautiful" (Persinger, Porgy). The chorus was singled out for praise as well. "The choral sound was lusty," reported the Detroit News. The News added that: "The production in fact is crammed with strong, flavorful performances" (Carr, Porgy and). The Detroit Free Press agreed calling the production "Vivid" and "Energetic" and reporting that: "The choral work was of an extremely high caliber." The Free Press singled out MOT veteran Ernestine Nimmons calling her voice "light and lovely" and in reference to her solo on "My Man's Gone Now," that her performance "lifts the production to its highest level of the evening in her sensitive rendition of this aria" (Guinn, Music).

The second production of the season, *La Boheme*, had five performances in November of 1975 at the Music Hall. It concluded with a November 21 tour production in Miller Auditorium, once again as guests

of the Kalamazoo Symphony Society. Frank Rizzo was back as stage director and Joseph Carmen De Rugeriis was the conductor. De Rugerriis had a varied background that included being assistant to Franco Zeffirelli and Gian Carlo Menotti. It was a large cast which included full chorus, a children's chorus and the Redford High School Band.

The reviews for this production were decidedly mixed. The South End called it "Bouncy" and said that it was a "thoroughly enjoyable production." The review went on:

There were several exciting things about this production of "La Boheme." The first dealt with the fact that the performers were not so much opera divas as singing actors. One of the problems with the Met is that, though many of the performers have gorgeous voices, their acting ability is almost nil, creating a lifeless production.

Not so with this MOT presentation. Though the voices definitely did not fill the Music Hall, the acting ability more than overcame the deficit. The performers acted as a team rather than as separate "stars."

Marianna Christos as Mimi could easily have centered all attention on herself, but to her credit and to the credibility of the part she was playing she did not.  
(Brown, Bouncy)

The Wyandotte News-Herald called it a "Beautiful Production" and said that it was a "successful example of the theatre's effort to present opera as entertainment as well as music" and that MOT did "justice to the music while enhancing the story with a handsome young cast" (Gates, Boheme). The Detroit News was somewhat more critical. While calling the production "bright," "youthful" and an "eye-pleaser," the review went

on to say that despite the "intelligent direction" it "hardly supplied full quotas of Puccini's impassioned lyric melodrama" (Carr, *Boheme* is).

The review in the Detroit Free Press was the most critical. There was some praise for director Frank Rizzo who "did a creditable job of moving the crowds around the stage with a purpose." Overall, however, the review was negative, contending that the production "never quite achieved the vocal intensity" that it needed. John Guinn, the reviewer, stated flatly: "The problem with the MOT production was that most of the voices were not up to the demands, and the result was diluted opera, pale and weak" (Guinn, *Opera Theatre Dilutes*).

The review drew some angry reactions from several readers. Two letters to the editor are examples of how the general public did not all agree with Mr. Guinn's assessment.

John Guinn's review of the Michigan Opera Theater's production of *La Boheme* was so far off the mark that I believe he has forfeited the usual protection afforded by deference to critical license.

I am sure that most who attended the opening performance would agree with me that it was a fresh, young, spirited and thoroughly enjoyable production.

While some of the singing was uneven, there were some really extraordinary arias and ensembles, and the total effort, far from the "diluted, pale, and weak" opera that Mr. Guinn found, was sparkling and enthusiastic.

It would be a shame if anyone would be dissuaded by your review from seeing later performances of this opera or other performances by the Michigan Opera Theater. I believe they are doing a great job. (Cohan, *Opera*)

A second letter was even more fun and added a perspective from a visitor from London, England:

If I heeded the critic, John Guinn, who damned the Michigan Opera Theatre's *La Boheme* in your columns last Sunday, I should have forgone a treat.

The surprise was not that the presentation of Puccini's opera was flawed (all but those fossilized in vinyl are so), but that it had such passion and vitality.

Europe can boast few regional opera companies which dare to mount full productions, and fewer which can offer exposure to such remarkable young talent. As a jealous visitor, I must affirm that Michigan musicians did a great deal better by Puccini than Mr. Guinn does by the English language, and express my hope that the MOT is not damaged by Mr. Guinn's semiliterate carping. (Greer, Michigan)

The final production, in Kalamazoo, was called "thoroughly successful" and reported that a "near-capacity audience of 3,300 fell in love" with "the six young Bohemians," who were "funny in their light moments and touching in their sorrow" (Heintz, Near).

"Catherine Malfitano is a wow in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, third offering of the Michigan Opera Theatre in the 1975-76 season." This is the way *Variety*, the show business newspaper, described a performance that was uniformly praised by all the critics. The *Variety* review went on to say: "The young soprano (27) brings big-eyed good looks and considerable acting ability with her excellent voice and control to the showcase role" (*Lucia*, *Variety*). While the rest of the production received generally good reviews, it was clear that Malfitano's performance was the

primary focus. The Eccentric newspaper summed it up: "Frankly, almost everything was secondary to her performance." The review explained: "Ms. Malfitano, an operatic phenomenon, is the catalyst for a production which exudes drama and excitement" (Smith, Opera). There was some mention of her top notes: "Here, the tone thinned, became shrill and constricted," reported the Detroit News, but, the review added, that it was "a voice capable of producing warm, liquid tones," and that "she can float a glistening pianissimo and has a fine sense of style" (Carr, Shows). The Detroit Free Press was even more impressed and put Malfitano in a very select group of singer actresses that included Maria Callas, Anna Moffo and Beverly Sills:

Her voice is like a seamless garment, clear from top to bottom. She floats pianissimos like Ivory floats soap, and she is not afraid to let her voice take on harshness when the dramatic situation demands it.

There are no technical problems for this voice: it has the ease of the greatly gifted, and she weds it to her considerable acting ability to make her Lucia one in a thousand. (Guinn, New )

Clearly it was a triumph for the up and coming soprano and added a measure of excitement for the new season's world premiere. DiChiera's plan to feature her as Lucia as a prelude to her leading role in *Washington Square* proved to be a good strategy as her performance was widely noted.

The Opera in Residence program, now in its third year, also had a successful run with *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The company hit the road with residencies in Alpena, Birmingham, Saginaw, Traverse City, Olivet and Cheboygan in a schedule that went from February through April of 1976. With MOT veterans Jan Albright as Lucia and Edward Kingins as Edgardo, the residence production was well received as the word continued to spread throughout the state. The Traverse City Record-Eagle reported that the cast got a standing ovation and concluded its review with a statement that summed up the prevailing sentiment with regards to MOT's successful Opera in Residence program: "We all look forward to the next visit of the Michigan Opera Theatre, and those who missed it this year would do well to make a firm resolve to plan ahead to attend in 1977" (Anderson, Lucia).

"Our Michigan Opera Theatre Saved Their Very Best for Last," (Guinn, Our) read the headline in the Free Press about the final mainstage production of the season. With five performances in February of 1976, *The Barber of Seville* was a big success and the critical response was almost completely positive. DiChiera brought back his friend and colleague Italo Tajo to direct. The well-known Metropolitan Opera basso's singing career had taken him to virtually every major opera house in the world. Now sixty years old, he was still singing at the Met but his career had evolved and he was also director of the Cincinnati College

Conservatory's opera workshop and a stage director at the Lyric Opera of Chicago School. At this stage of his career he was primarily a director and teacher and was going strong. He was a vocal proponent of opera as vital theatre: "I think of a production as a perfecting operation of artistic achievement. I'm not against stars, but I believe in good theatre. Theatre is most important" (Guinn, Directing). On this point he and DiChiera were in complete agreement. As a colleague, Tajo was an important influence and made several key contributions in the company's early years. In addition to the professional relationship, he and Mrs. Tajo had become close friends with Karen and David DiChiera. For this visit the Tajos were houseguests of the DiChieras. Mrs. Tajo, a stage actress in her native Italy, is godmother to Christina DiChiera who was three years old at the time. One of the highlights of this visit was a luncheon given by Karen DiChiera to honor Mrs. Tajo at the Detroit Historical Museum. Many opera patrons and friends were on hand to meet Mrs. Tajo and tour the museum. The tour guide was museum director Solan Weeks, who had been a tremendous help finding and loaning props for MOT productions. Among the many support activities Karen DiChiera worked on was stage properties; thus the connection to Weeks. The bond between the Tajos and the DiChieras was a strong, mutually supportive one.

Italo Tajo's experienced hand and expert direction was clearly the key to the success of this production of *The Barber of Seville*. The South

End reported: "Thanks to the exuberant creative talents of stage director Italo Tajo, this production is the liveliest of the season" (Persinger, Barber). The Free Press was in full agreement. Excerpts from the review:

If any of the principals stood out, it was Charles Roe in the title role. His Figaro was the incarnation of Italian comic opera. He walked like he had springs for ankles, and he sang with a ringing baritone that refused to compromise on quality.

Brenda Boozer's Rosina was not far behind. She has a light mezzo, fully capable of wrapping itself around Rossini's coloratura passages. She also has an innate sense of comic timing.

Much credit for the production's success must go to stage director Italo Tajo. A bookful of his details brought forth the comedic elements, though never at the expense of the music. (Guinn, Our)

The Detroit News reported on the performance of Kathleen Battle and summarized the response to this exciting debut:

Her tone was fresh and her phrasing was agile. She paid scrupulous attention to note values and ornamentation without seeming over deliberate. Her good looks and hint of spitfire spirit also contributed to a remarkably well-rounded portrayal from such a young singer. (Carr, New voice)

According to the Eccentric newspaper: "It is a thrilling production that can be counted as a triumph for the company" (Smith, Barber). It was clearly a great way to finish the season and help generate enthusiasm for upcoming activities and productions.

At MOT everything was growing and this included the Board of Directors. On February 12, 1976 Board Chairman Lynn Townsend announced a reorganization and expansion of a structure that would include a Board of Directors of no more than fifteen which would be an operating board, and a greatly expanded Board of Trustees allowing many more people the opportunity to be involved with the company. Mr. Townsend was quoted in the Grosse Pointe News:

Michigan Opera Theatre has shown tremendous growth since the original committee was formed in 1970. We would like the governing body of the opera to reflect that growth, and to include increased numbers of individuals who have shown an active interest in the state's newest and most progressive major cultural institution. (Michigan Opera Expands)

The Board of Directors elected the following officers; Lynn Townsend, Chairman of the Board; John C. Griffin, Vice-Chairman and Secretary; David DiChiera, President; and Harwood Rydholm, Secretary. Touche Ross & Co. were the accountants and MOT's legal counsel was McClintock, Donovan, Carson, and Roach. The newly formed Board of Trustees held its first annual meeting on November 22, 1976. An expanding support base was, of course, critical to the growth of Michigan Opera Theatre.

The activities at the Music Hall continued in this, its third season. Three productions in early 1976 are particularly notable. Two of these were produced by DiChiera and the Music Hall, like the previous year's

production of Bernstein's *Mass*, separate and in addition to MOT's season. The third was a world premiere.

In late January of 1976, DiChiera produced the rarely seen Kurt Weill - Bertolt Brecht theatre piece *The Seven Deadly Sins*. Probably best described as a ballet with song, it doesn't fit neatly into any category. Most importantly, the piece featured the famous singer Cleo Laine in her North American theatre debut. DiChiera became acquainted with her from her jazz concert performances at the Music Hall and he had found a way to utilize her unique talent in a very different and new way. Cleo Laine was such a well-known performer that it created quite a public relations buzz and gave DiChiera an opportunity to experiment with a piece that would not normally be a popular choice. Conducted by Laine's husband, the formidable John Dankworth and directed by the famous choreographer Anna Sokolow, this one-act theatre piece was slated as the first half of an evening that concluded with a concert with Laine and Dankworth in a more familiar setting. The critical response was summarized in the Detroit Free Press:

"The Seven Deadly Sins" at the Music Hall is saved by Miss Laine's impeccable delivery of the musical narrative, Weill's music and four local talents: Conwell Carrington, Gene A. Wabeke, Dennis Roland and Davis A. Gloff.

The evening becomes a memorable event after the stage props have been put away and Miss Laine and John Dankworth get into their exciting concert format. (Thurston, Play's)

DiChiera put together another very rarely performed piece as part of the Bicentennial tribute. Opening on May 3 for a two-week run was the Music Hall Center production of John Philip Sousa's 1896 comic opera *El Capitan*. In order to bring this piece to life, both on stage and in the eye of the ticket buying public, DiChiera contracted the famous comedian, actor and movie star, Dick Shawn. *El Capitan* is a musical farce in the same vein as Gilbert and Sullivan, with Shawn starring as a bungling, cowardly Viceroy of a South American country in the middle of a revolution. DiChiera was quoted in the Detroit Monitor: "With Mr. Shawn on board I think we're ready to give Detroit a show unlike any they're likely to see for awhile" (Sousa's 'El Capitan'). The production earned favorable reviews for Shawn, director Dominic Missimi and MOT veterans Jan Albright and Edward Kingins as the young lovers. Additionally, to launch a membership drive, the Music Hall Association invited the public to a special free, open rehearsal of *El Capitan* to introduce new people to the Music Hall and to recruit volunteers. Having film, stage and television star Dick Shawn on board created much interest and events like this one generate valuable publicity.

Finally, to close out the Music Hall season, DiChiera and managing director Levine hosted the world premiere of an original musical *Summer Snow* by the legendary Fred Rogers, the award winning host of the

popular children's television program "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

*Summer Snow* is a story of three friends who go out to play a game that only two can play. It is a story about how people need each other and it is treated in an entertaining but educational manner. Rogers wrote both the music and the book for *Summer Snow*. DiChiera was quoted in the Michigan Chronicle:

It's appropriate for Music Hall to conclude its very successful third season with 'Summer Snow'. Children are too often overlooked in creating live theater events. Parents in the Detroit area have an opportunity to share this unique experience with their children.

There is dancing, music, singing and acting in this fullscale live theater production, the same production values given to adult musicals built around 'character value' important to children and their parents. (Nolan, Dean)

### **1976 - Rite of Maturation**

"Nothing testifies to the growing up of a regional opera company quite like a world premiere," proclaimed Time Magazine in the fall of 1976. The review went on to report: "With a big floodlight pawing a cloudy Detroit sky, the Michigan Opera Theatre enjoyed this rite of maturation last week." (Bender, Rite). This is an example of the national recognition and the incredible press and media coverage for MOT's first world premiere, Thomas Pasatieri's *Washington Square*. It was commissioned by MOT and brought to life from an idea DiChiera had

about the main character Catherine Sloper. *Washington Square* is based on the Henry James novel which later became a play and a highly regarded film and tells the story of the frustrating events in the life of Heiress Catherine Sloper. "The idea of transforming Catherine Sloper into an operatic heroine was one that excited my imagination as a young composer in the early sixties," (DiChiera, Background) DiChiera recalled in the program notes. As it turned out he would end up "coming to terms with her" as a commissioner and producer and not as a composer.

DiChiera met Pasatieri in December of 1974 at the Kennedy Center. Pasatieri had already achieved considerable success with his operas *The Black Widow* and *The Trial of Mary Lincoln*. *Washington Square* would be the young composer's thirteenth opera. The two discovered that "we shared a mutual passion for *Washington Square*." When DiChiera had inquired about the rights they were not available but it turned out that more recently, "Tom had already cleared its availability. It was an exciting impulse as we agreed, 'Let's do it for Detroit!'" (DiChiera, Background).

Kenward Elmslie was selected as librettist since he had a strong orientation toward theatre as well as opera, having had musicals and major operas already to his credit, including *The Seagull* with Pasatieri. The same prerequisite, an equal emphasis on theatre and opera, dictated all the decisions on the opera. This included the selection of the

renowned stage director Nikos Psacharopoulos. He came with a very impressive resumé that included being Executive Director of the prestigious Williamstown Theatre Festival, which he helped arrange in 1955. He had also taught at several colleges including, at that time Yale University. Psacharopoulos also directed the first black musical on Broadway, Langston Hughes' *Tambourines To Glory*, and had directed at the American Shakespearean Festival, Spoleto, Westminster Abbey and the New York City Opera. The music director and conductor was well known Henry Holt, who had been the music and education director at the Seattle Opera for ten years and had the distinction of being only the second American conductor ever to conduct a completed production of Wagner's *The Ring Of the Nibelung* in German, and a second completed production in English. Along with all his other credits he had been the music director and conductor of the world premiere of Pasatieri's *Black Widow* and of the west coast premiere of Pasatieri's *The Seagull* so he was clearly familiar and in tune with the young composer. In addition, under Holt's guidance, Seattle Opera established exemplary education and outreach programs through which thousands of Washington State school children got the opportunity to see opera, ballet and mixed-media productions. Holt would become a friend and colleague with both David and Karen DiChiera as MOT's department of community programs continued to formulate.

DiChiera had assembled an outstanding team for *Washington Square* and an excellent cast led by Catherine Malfitano who was called "riveting" (Carr, New opera) in the Detroit News. Malfitano, coming off her recent successful MOT debut in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, had also created the title role in the world premiere of Carlisle Floyd's *Bilby's Doll* and had recently made her Covent Garden debut as Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*. Her impressive resumé also included the role of Berta in the east coast premiere of Pasatieri's *Black Widow* and the premiere production of Pasatieri's *The Seagull* for Houston's American Series. The staff and cast were truly made up of seasoned professionals who in many cases knew each other well. It was a formidable group indeed.

From the beginning of the process certain characteristics for the opera were agreed on which reflected the needs and the style of MOT. The pit at Music Hall holds a limited number of musicians so the work was conceived with a chamber ensemble of fifteen players. The elimination of a chorus was a step to enhance the theatrical realism of the piece and to give it more the feeling of drama than of grand opera. It was a merger of aesthetic and practical considerations.

"While I am optimistic and enthusiastic about *Washington Square*, its ultimate success or failure is almost secondary to the really important implication of Michigan Opera Theatre's commission" DiChiera wrote in the program notes. He wasn't necessarily expecting a "masterpiece of

tomorrow" but believed strongly in the philosophy that "every art form, be it opera, theatre, dance or symphonic music, can only remain viable if it continues to be enriched by new works" (DiChiera, Background). That turned out to be a prophetic statement as, almost across the board the production was very enthusiastically received but the music was generally deemed, for example, "insubstantial" (Carr, New opera) and "only of passing interest" (Guinn, Fine). Excerpts from The Detroit News review:

Miss Malfitano, gorgeously gowned by Santo Loquasto (whose period sets were evocative) and looking as if she just stepped out of a faded lithograph, is one of the best singing actresses around.

Taking advantage of the fact that Catherine represses more than she ever expresses, Miss Malfitano accomplished more with her eyes than Pasatieri made it possible for her to accomplish with her voice, conveying desperation, resignation, and degrees of grace and sensitivity that were callously brutalized by the two men who framed her life. She was riveting. Conductor Henry Holt handled Pasatieri's chamber textures with aplomb. (Carr, New Opera)

The reviews were all positive. The show business newspaper Variety credited DiChiera for commissioning "a fascinating work, and then giving it a memorable treatment." Variety continued by calling it a "coming of age for local opera" and reported that the audience "reacted with rapt attention and ovations." Also from Variety:

The Michigan Opera Theatre can only be congratulated for its mounting of "Washington Square," for the cast was nearly ideal and every element went into making this a rewarding whole. A composer could not hope for a more fulfilling realization of a new work

than Pasatieri's received, and the public was quick to recognize the all-around high standard. (Jacobson, Washington)

John Guinn in the Detroit Free Press reported on the "Fine Teamwork" that was apparent and said that the success of the production was due to "the nearly perfect collaboration of the string of people who serve Pasatieri's music so well" (Guinn, Fine). The Flint Journal called the evening "Stirring" and said that everyone was able to "enjoy the thrill of a very well-made, brand new opera, performed with sparkle and conviction" (Harvey, Stirring).

The positive reviews poured in from all over. The Detroit Monitor called it "A Delightful Surprise" (Delaney, Delightful) and Wayne State's South End said, "Top notch singing and acting by the entire cast makes this opera a delightful opening for another Michigan Opera season" (Persinger, World). The Associated Press reported: "Detroiters Flock to See Opera's Premiere" (AP, Detroiters) and the New York Daily News reviewer appreciated the "charming" Music Hall and in a supportive review said: "Under the aegis of general director David DiChiera, MOT, through a canny selection of repertory, performers and producers, has become the focal point of a cultural (and perhaps social) renaissance in Detroit" (Zakariasen, Slick).

The good news was spreading and Opera Canada, in a uniformly positive review, even gave credit to Pasatieri's music saying that

especially Act II "was lyrical and gripping throughout" (Mercer, Detroit).

The Cleveland Press headline read "Michigan opera gets an A for effort" and concluded a glowing review with a very complimentary statement:

David DiChiera and his Michigan Opera Theatre are to be complimented not only for surviving (as our Lake Erie Opera Theatre did not) but for prospering and above all for having the imagination and determination to go ahead and commission a new work. It is the only way opera can be made to grow strong roots. (Hruby, Michigan)

The Christian Science Monitor also contributed a complimentary account. Referring to DiChiera:

He has overcome Detroit's inferiority complex about the arts by mounting events of national interest ("Washington Square," for one). The artistic level keeps climbing, and Dr. DiChiera, despite the inherent problems and the rigors of fund raising, is being true to his motto, "We'll do anything for something we believe in." He believes in the music hall, in Michigan Opera Theatre, and in broad culture in Detroit. Apparently, Detroiters are beginning to believe in him too. (Eckert, Michigan)

Finally, as if to punctuate the entire experience, Board Chairman Townsend received a letter from the White House. First Lady Betty Ford, who was listed as Honorary Chairman of the world premiere, wrote that "with gratitude and my warmest best wishes" she wanted to "convey my encouragement for this exciting new contribution to our American cultural heritage" (Ford, 1976). She was expressing gratitude not only for a completely successful production but also to the prestigious group of

devoted private citizens who made the event possible financially. The group was called the Premiere Benefactors, and the Honorary Chairman of the powerful assemblage of individuals who gave generously to help defray the costs was Mrs. William Milliken, First Lady of Michigan.

*Washington Square* was also supported by grants from the Michigan Council for the Arts and the National Opera Institute and the costume and set designs were made possible by a generous gift from Mrs. Robert Hamady.

All things considered, *Washington Square* was a profoundly important event in the history of Michigan Opera Theatre. It was a defining moment for the company. Opera News said: "For Detroit it was a major step forward in sophisticated lyric theatre" (Jacobson, Detroit 1976). It is clearly one of the very most important historical mileposts in the company's formative years.

Next up in the 1976-77 season was MOT's second production of *Madame Butterfly*. The reviews were somewhat mixed but the bulk of the criticism was positive. John Guinn in the Detroit Free Press said that "the production was an adequate telling of Puccini's bittersweet tale of the wronged Japanese geisha" and criticized stage director Louis Galterio because he "loaded the principles down with angular movements rather than fluid ones." He also called the voices just "more than average"

(Guinn, *Butterfly*). The South End agreed and reported that the production "falls short" (Reynolds, *Butterfly*).

There was also much positive criticism with the Windsor Star calling it a "Sound 'Butterfly'" (van Vugt, Sound) and the Detroit Monitor saying that it "must be considered among the best of their [MOT's] productions yet" (Delaney, Puccini's). The Flint Journal felt that the production was a "success" and that the opera had "strong appeal" (Harvey, *Madame*). The Michigan Free Press also chimed in on the positive side; "Butterfly Soars," read the headline and the review went on to report that it was an "appreciative, attentive audience, an audience who laughed at every funny line" (Stiles, Michigan). Following the Music Hall performances the company took its then annual trip to Kalamazoo's Miller Auditorium for a performance for which there was "Lots of Enthusiasm," for "another successful collaboration between the Kalamazoo Symphony and Michigan Opera Theatre" (Heinz, Lots).

"Butterfly" was followed by a production of *Naughty Marietta*, the well-known Victor Herbert operetta. Once again DiChiera found a place for State Senator Jack Faxon as he continued the shrewd marketing and public relations technique of featuring the important local personality. The Free Press reported on the Senator:

A devotee of the arts, Faxon is a participant in, as well as a patron of, many cultural events around Michigan. He is chairman of the Joint Legislative

Committee on the Arts, and was instrumental in making Michigan second only to New York in state support of the arts. (Holmes, State)

The Senator's intentions were honorable in that, as reported in the Free Press, he hoped that his presence would "make people see that opera can be fun as a contemporary entertainment" (Holmes, State). Jack Faxon was clearly an important ally and friend, and while not everyone liked him as a performer, his presence on the Music Hall stage would continue to pay dividends in terms of publicity, and in the inner workings of state government.

The production of *Naughty Marietta* was very favorably reviewed in the media. The Eccentric newspapers said it was "full of frolic" (Reynolds, Marietta), the Medical Center News called it "Delightful" (Reynolds, Naughty) and The Southfield Eccentric, calling the production a "crowd pleaser" reported:

If the test of a good production is the reaction of the audience then Michigan Opera Theatre's "Naughty Marietta" is a huge success. From the opening number, the audience was captivated by the lively acting, colorful set and costumes, pleasantly professional singing and dancing and the broad, slapstick comedy (Iden, Naughty).

The Flint Journal had especially nice words for stage director Dominic

Missimi:

These goings-on are delightfully decked out in sparkling music, dancing and comedy, all under the sure direction of MOT's Dominic Missimi, long known in the

Detroit area for outstanding productions at the University of Detroit-Marygrove Center for the Performing Arts. (Harvey, 'Naughty')

The Detroit News sang the praises of the two leads:

MOT stalwarts Jan Albright and Charles Roe were resplendent as Marietta and Captain Dick. Miss Albright's was a real champagne performance and Roe, a baritone who is exploring the tenor range, supplied plenty of ring and heft. (Carr, 2 appealing)

The Detroit Free Press summed up by reporting that the production

"turned out to be a fun-filled romp through yesteryear" (Guinn, Naughty).

To close the season was MOT's first production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. "See it!" That was the advice of Ann Arbor's Michigan Daily in a review that said: "By far, it is the best production of an opera I have seen by the MOT, which, considering their past successes, is high praise indeed" (Jones, MOT's). It was a totally new production and Ronda Levine was back as stage director. She was quoted in the Free Press about the fresh approach: "We don't want our production to be pompous or boring. We've tried to do a fresh staging, closer to the spirit of Mozart's original intentions" (Guinn, Magic). Levine was trying to close the distance between artist and audience, a continuing effort toward accessibility. Detroit native Robert Israel was contracted to design costumes and sets. It was his first artistic endeavor in his hometown since establishing himself in his profession as a free-lance designer. The Eccentric newspapers in one review called *The Magic Flute* "a treat for

the eyes and ears and a tribute to MOT" (Iden, Opera) and said that "MOT blows life into 'Magic Flute'" in another review. This second review went on:

This sense of play was simply and brilliantly captured in the Michigan Opera Theatre's new production of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" at Music Hall. Designer Robert Israel and Director Rhoda Levine have transposed the musical joy, the sense of play and essential simplicity of the story. (Reynolds, MOT)

Kathleen Battle was back to sing the role of Pamina as was Ronald Raines to sing Papageno. Both received consistently positive reviews exemplified by the Windsor Star review, which proclaimed "Fine cast brings magic to opera," and went on to explain, about the magic:

Most of it was generated by a superior cast headed by soprano Kathleen Battle and baritone Ronald Raines. Kathleen Battle gave nothing less than a command performance as Pamina, while Ronald Raines was an absolute delight in the role of Papageno, the birdcatcher. (van Vugt, Fine)

Jay Carr summed up the reaction in the Detroit News calling this production "easily the most imaginative the MOT has ever attempted" (Carr, Magic).

The run of *The Magic Flute* included a tour to Flint's Whiting Auditorium. The Flint Journal called it a "striking" performance and also singled out Battle and Raines:

The two singers most responsible for one's not missing the traditional opulence of "Magic Flute" productions were Kathleen Battle as Pamina and

Ronald Raines as Papageno. Their characterizations were full-fledged and projected in voices that were vibrant and tonally secure. (Harvey, Magic)

The 1977 Opera in Residence featured *The Magic Flute* and the Karen DiChiera/Joan Hill children's opera *Vigilance*. Karen DiChiera's position in the community programs and education areas of the company was growing; soon she would take over this critical department. The Residence schedule included Alpena, Petoskey, Algonac, Livonia and Holland and as Alpena Courier-Journal put it "The enthusiasm was high" (Jackson, Opera). A headline from the Toronto Star summarized the growing stature of Michigan Opera Theatre after the highly successful 1976-77 season and in anticipation of the upcoming events of the 1977-78 season. "When Detroit goes to the opera the rest of the country watches" (Littler, When).

With the announcement of the upcoming 1977-78 season came the news of three notable developments for the company: DiChiera's growing responsibilities in OPERA America, the innovations in the apprentice program and Karen DiChiera's activities as an artist-in-residence in Birmingham. As announced in the MOT newsletter in the spring of 1977, DiChiera had moved up the administrative ladder at OPERA America by being elected a Vice President "by unanimous vote of the 44 member companies which comprise the league of professional opera companies in the United States and Canada" (David DiChiera Elected). He was also

Chairman of the Auditions Committee, a post he continued to hold while being Vice President. John Crosby of the Santa Fe Opera, was elected President and along with DiChiera as Vice Presidents were Kurt Herbert Adler of the San Francisco Opera, and David Glockley of the Houston Opera. Filling out the executive committee were Treasurer Michael Bronson of the Metropolitan Opera and Secretary Glynn Ross of the Seattle Opera. As a member of this prestigious executive committee, it was clear that DiChiera had secured a place at the very center of the most important and influential group in the North American opera community.

Also notable was the formation of MOT's new apprenticeship program, which was administrated by staff music director Mark Flint. Of the almost four hundred people who auditioned, forty were selected to be members of the program and were committed to performing in three out of four of the upcoming season's regularly scheduled operas. In addition the apprentices attended workshops in voice, movement, acting and make-up. At this time MOT also expanded the number of interns in the production and administration departments. The Eccentric newspaper reported on these developments:

Both the new apprenticeship program and the regular introduction of administrative apprentices fulfill MOT's ongoing commitment to education, opportunity, and the community. In offering genuine breaks for young performers and those seeking careers in the arts.

**MOT is thereby gaining fresh and innovative talent along the way. (Opera theatre innovates)**

### **The Department of Community Programs**

**Karen DiChiera's star was on the rise in the realm of education and community programs. She had been completely immersed in the company's activities from the very beginning, taking on whatever needed to be done, whether it was props, administration, coordinating and organizing volunteers, helping form the first volunteer associations for both the Music Hall and MOT, marketing, making community contacts for tours and residencies, hosting special events and opening her home to innumerable meetings, rehearsals and as a warm, comfortable place for countless artists and friends who needed a temporary home while they were in town. She was also involved at the national level on OPERA America's first education committee with Henry Holt of Seattle, and has been an active advocate for the handicapped with regards to accessibility in theatres. This talented, energetic and versatile woman was most comfortable, however, as a composer and educator and in the spring of 1977 she was engaged as an artist-in-residence at Birmingham Westchester Elementary School. She was already well known because of the eight year old "Awareness through Music" program that she developed and was still teaching twice a week. The Westchester**

Principal was quoted in the *Eccentric* newspaper: "Karen was the unanimous choice of the parents and teachers who interviewed the applicants for the position," said Westchester Principal Jane Heckman. "We feel so lucky to have her" (Gillette, Westchester).

Her methods were new and innovative, having evolved out of her diverse background:

I've never started kids on an instrument. Right away, they see 88 piano keys. They have to learn to master the keys instead of compose.

If you give kids things they make noise with anyway, such as their bodies or pots and pans, they're not inhibited by the fact that it's an instrument. They're just listening to it as sound.

Youngsters can begin to get a feel for composing by organizing into groups and just using their bodies, she said. Somebody clicks their fingers. Somebody taps their feet. Somebody starts clapping – and they're on their way to organizing sound. (Connelly-Szczesny, 'Doodling')

The Westchester Elementary school program concluded with two performances that Mrs. DiChiera described as "an evening of all world premiers" (Gillette, Westchester). The evening was a variety of group composition by the students and a musical called *Pete the No-Good Pirate*, which was composed by Mrs. DiChiera and her friend and colleague Joan Hill. The event was a big success and the program received extensive coverage in the local newspapers.

Karen DiChiera was a force to be reckoned with and in the fall of 1978 she founded MOT's Community Programs Department. The new

department had education, outreach, touring and residence under its wing. Karen DiChiera had finally locked into a professional position of great importance to the company and was responsible for the essential, fundamental areas of reaching out and connecting with the community. Her diverse, eclectic background along with her creative, hands-on inclinations combined with her nationally recognized stature as an educator and composer to make her the perfect choice. Through her "tenure" as a full-time volunteer, involved with every aspect of the company and its formation, she had made a contribution to the formative years that is simply incalculable. Now as Director of Community Programs she would provide the inspired and dedicated leadership which would make her department one of the primary strengths of the company while garnering state and national recognition for its varied and unique programming. The Community Programs department, under the leadership of Karen DiChiera, over the years has made an invaluable contribution to the character and strength of Michigan Opera Theatre and would continue to be a key factor in the building and solidifying of an audience for this regional opera company.

In 1990 she won the prestigious Governor's Arts in Education Award. The profile written about her for the award ceremony includes the following:

DiChiera is well known for her work with minority groups and audiences with varied disabilities. She has been instrumental in implementing American Sign Language interpreted performances of mainstage productions and taped program notes for the blind for Michigan Opera Theatre, Opera Pacific and Dayton Opera. In addition, she has made opera companies and educators aware of the need for ramps for easy access, special performances for the developmentally disabled, encouragement for minorities, and opportunities for new artists. DiChiera is a member of the statewide board of directors of Very Special Arts, Michigan and helped to found and is chairperson of VSA, Southeast Michigan. (DiChiera, Governor's)

After the award there was a nice feature in the Oakland Press which helps one to gain a complete picture:

Traveling throughout both peninsulas of Michigan year round, DiChiera "teaches adults and children in classrooms and workshops to create original works through improvisation in music, drama and dance."

"We bring musical theatre productions to thousands of people."

She also is Artistic Director of Community Programs for Opera Pacific in California and educational consultant for the Dayton Opera.

This year, she worked with learning disabled and emotionally impaired junior high school students in Hamtramck to create a one-act musical, "Follow the Drug Free Road." For Ludington Middle Schoolers in Detroit, she did a program, "How Mankind Uses the Arts."

"Through the Department of Indian Affairs, librettist Bill Kirk and I composed 'Nanabush' (Hiawatha's real name) which we've performed at Michigan Indian reservations."

DiChiera directs interpreters to use American sign language for the deaf during performances of Michigan Opera Theatre Company. She has created

programs for the Oakland County Schools to expose deaf children to music. (Jacobs, DiChiera)

### **Seasons of Note 1977-1983**

The next six seasons were filled with artistic successes. In the period from the fall of 1977 to the fall of 1983 MOT would sustain unprecedented growth in a period that had no real failures. In the spring of 1977 the Detroit Free Press ran an article with the headline "Michigan Opera Theatre: A Classical Success Story." The article describes the upbeat situation at MOT:

Detroit's interest in classical music may be lagging. But when it comes to popular support, the Michigan Opera Theatre is dancing rings around its colleagues. Ninety to 95 percent of the tickets for each performance are sold. Advertisements in the program book have doubled in the last year. There are 5,500 season subscribers, with the list growing each year. (Guinn, Michigan)

The article quotes DiChiera saying: "I've always felt that opera is a very 'with-it' form," and that he felt the ever-expanding audience was "comfortable" and that they "relate to what we do, rather than feel like they're in a no-mans-land" (Guinn, Michigan). The growth and the enthusiasm would continue in this period. DiChiera was correct in his assessment; there was a dedicated and "with-it" core audience forming. It was the foundation on which he could build an institution, something that would last.

While there were certainly some differences of opinion among the critics at times, MOT put together a string of seasons filled with highlights as it continued to establish its reputation as an exciting and innovative new company. The 1977-78 season included MOT's first venture into the French repertoire. The tremendous success of the previous season had led to an unprecedented demand for season tickets and a list of names of people waiting to become season ticket holders grew so fast that renewing one's season tickets before the deadline became critical since the demand was so high.

The 1977-78 season opened with a production that typified MOT's artistic reach and its support in the community. It began on September 30, 1977 with a much-anticipated production of the American composer Marc Blitzstein's classic *Regina*, a Michigan premiere. Based on Lillian Hellman's play *The Little Foxes*, *Regina* is a story of greed and cruelty set during the industrialization of the Old South. The work ran on Broadway before moving to the operatic stage. Opera News, referring to this production of *Regina*, said that DiChiera and MOT had "brought it back to life to open their current season and proved that it deserves a place among the cream of American music-theatre pieces" (Jacobson, Detroit 1977).

"With a swank that rivaled a Met opening night, the Michigan Opera Theatre began its 10<sup>th</sup> season with Marc Blitzstein's opera *Regina*."

This was the lead in a positive Free Press review. It had praise for the leading lady Joan Diener-Narre, who was best known for her five-year run as Aldonza-Dulcinea in the original Broadway production of *The Man of La Mancha*. The review said Diener-Narre, as Regina, was "exotic" and "acted with the super intensity that the role demands" (George, Swank). The Toledo Blade also ran a very positive review that said that Diener-Narre "combined solid singing and acting to create a completely selfish witch, whose vitriol literally oozes out of her." The Blade called it "an all-around splendid effort" and stated that DiChiera and MOT were to be "congratulated on this effort on behalf of a genuine bit of American musical theatre and a forgotten American playwright-composer of rare gifts" (Nelson, Michigan). The Washington Star called it "daring" and said it was a "fine revival, the first completely new production by a major company in 18 years" (Lowens, Revived).

"This one hasn't been easy," was the way DiChiera described *Regina* in the Detroit News. DiChiera took over the directing of the opera following the resignation of director Frank Rizzo. The News report explained that the departure of Rizzo had to do with, according to DiChiera, "certain artistic differences of opinion that were ultimately my responsibility" (Breitmeyer, Opera). It was a situation where the parties apparently had agreed to disagree and Rizzo left with no hard feelings. He would return to direct many times at MOT. It is yet another example of

the need for diverse skills and the managerial strength of character that is required of a successful impresario.

Next up was MOT's first venture into the French repertoire with the company's first production of Bizet's *Carmen*, one of the most popular operas of all time. Brenda Boozer was back to share the role of Carmen with Chilean mezzo-soprano Victoria Vergara of the New York City Opera. John West, as Don Jose, won consistently positive reviews as a "winning tenor, with security and musicianship not often found in regional opera" (Guinn, *Carmen*). West alternated in the role with MOT veteran Edward Kingins. Overall the reviewers reported somewhat mixed results in the production and it was clear that the principal singers were the strength of this *Carmen*. Carmen Balthrop was featured as Micaela and created a role that was "beautifully sung and touchingly acted." This was Balthrop's debut with MOT and it came after a highly regarded performance in the lead of Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* that played in Houston, at the Kennedy Center and was recorded. She shared the role with MOT veteran Earnestine Nimmons. The *Detroit News* summarized by calling *Carmen* "refreshing theatre." The review stated flatly that despite some criticism: "Make no mistake, though, [this] was a strong 'Carmen'" (Carr, *Music Hall Carmen*).

Sigmund Romberg's most popular operetta *The Student Prince* opened on January 20, 1978 and was the third opera of the season.

Charles Roe, who had become a leading artist with the New York City Opera was tapped for the lead role. Roe was an MOT stalwart as he had performed in every MOT season since 1971. The popular response to *The Student Prince* was so great that six extra productions were added to the schedule to accommodate the demand for tickets.

The production "Gets High Marks" reported John Guinn in the Detroit Free Press who went on to say: "It's satisfying to witness a production as expertly prepared as this one was." He also had praise for the stage director Tad Tadlock who "kept things moving with vitality onstage, and the brief ballet she choreographed added to the evenings impact" (Guinn, Student).

"They Saved The Best For Last" read the headline in the Detroit Free Press about the season's final production of Gounod's *Faust*. "Heavenly" the review said, "just may be the best thing MOT has done to date" (Guinn, MOT 'Faust'). The production featured the return of Leona Mitchell as Marguerite and she earned overwhelmingly positive reviews. The Detroit Free Press summarized the response to the performance of this rising star:

Leona Mitchell's sweet, crystal-clear soprano was constantly ravishing, with never a hint of strain or brittleness. She made Marquerite a tragic rather than pathetic creature, and at both ends of her range demonstrated the strength and beauty of which great voices are made of. (Guinn, MOT 'Faust')

The Eccentric joined in the positive response with a review that had as its headline, "MOT goes big time with brilliant 'Faust'" (Reynolds, MOT goes). The Detroit News also loved it, calling this entire production a "standout" and said this *Faust* had a "sense of hard-edged immediacy" and an "enormously welcome tough-mindedness." The News also made a very telling comparison to the Met saying that MOT's version "put the Metropolitan Opera's staging of 'Faust' to shame" (Carr, New staging). This was, of course, high praise indeed and was an indication that MOT was closing the gap and could not be ignored in its growing stature as a legitimate presence in the upper echelon of opera companies.

The 1977-78 season also featured a revival during the holidays of Gian Carlo Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* in December of 1977. Thirteen-year-old Michael Wantuck was featured as Amahl. He was already a show business veteran who had played the title role in *Oliver* as it toured the Midwest with Vincent Price and was a featured performer on network television with Jackie Gleason in "The Honeymooners." The production, conducted by Mark Flint and directed by MOT stage manager Preston Terry, was not the first, nor would it be the last time DiChiera would produce his friend and colleague Menotti's one-act holiday classic. Also noteworthy is the fact that MOT, always ready for an opportunity to go into the community, performed a condensed version of this production of "Amahl" at the Twelve Oaks Mall in Novi, Michigan. There were six

performances in three days and the idea of taking it into a mall was yet another example of the grass roots community based efforts that are one of the fundamental strengths of this regional opera company.

**Matrix:Midland** was a major summer festival which had its inaugural season in June, 1978, sponsored by the Herbert H. and Grace A. Dow Foundation. It was billed as a celebration of the arts and sciences. With three weekends encompassing two full weeks of activities, the new festival featured a major contribution from DiChiera and MOT. DiChiera had already impacted the community of Midland, Michigan through MOT's touring activities.

DiChiera has been a leader in promoting cultural activity outstate. He has often taken his Michigan Opera Theatre productions on the road, and they turned away several hundred people when the MOT made its first appearance in Midland in 1970. That helped to spark plans for a community performing arts center, which includes a fine 1,500-seat auditorium and art galleries. **Matrix:Midland** will be focused there. (Angelo, DiChiera)

Michigan Opera Theatre's contribution to the festival included a major revival of Aaron Copland's *The Tender Land* with the composer on the podium, outdoor performances of *Madame Butterfly*, the premiere of *Singers*, a new work by Charles Strouse commissioned by MOT for this festival, and a one month apprentice program for forty singers and technicians from all over the United States.

MOT's commitment to American opera made *The Tender Land* a natural choice for Matrix:Midland, especially since Copland himself, widely considered the quintessential American composer, was available and eager to participate. Having Copland on the team gave the production a stamp of authenticity that, along with all the publicity and attention, was instrumental in helping MOT secure its first national television broadcast. The production was taped by WCMU-TV, the public television station in Mt. Pleasant, and was accepted by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) for national broadcast. This acceptance by PBS attested to the quality of the production and the professionalism of the performance. It was broadcast the following year in August of 1979. After the broadcast, John Guinn in the Detroit Free Press called the production a "polished effort" but referred to the music as "dull" saying "I kept thinking what a shame it was to waste such a good production on such a weak work." In support of the production Guinn continued: "Copland himself conducts and does so with flair and style. The Festival Orchestra acquits itself handily, and the singers are fully able to meet the music's demands" (Guinn, Copland's).

The production at Matrix:Midland received uniformly positive reviews, and not everyone agreed that Copland's music was dull. The Chicago Tribune, in a glowing review, stated "The heartland has reclaimed 'Tender Land'" and reported:

And what more fitting work to launch a new festival in the American Midwest than Aaron Copland's "The Tender Land" (1954), an opera rooted in heartland soil. When the five principals sing of "the promise of living, the promise of growing" at the end of Act I, it's as if the composer had anticipated this occasion.

It's a pity that Michigan Opera Theatre has no plans to present the work elsewhere, for here is one of the best post-war American operas, undeserving of the neglect that major houses have visited on it. (Von Rhein, heartland)

*The Tender Land* was the opening event for this festival and was the primary event of the first weekend. In yet another deft move DiChiera brought in Eugene Loring to do the choreography. Loring's first collaboration with Copland had resulted in *Billy The Kid* and for this production Copland's famous colleague created an exuberant ballet for the powerful choral number "Stomp Your Foot," which got an enthusiastic response from the critics. Opera Canada, in a completely supportive review reported: "A magnificent Robert Joel Schwartz stage design set the mood for *The Tender Land* and there was effective lighting by Thomas J. Munn. The Michael Montel staging was outstanding, as was the choreography of Eugene Loring" (Smith, Matrix). The production of *The Tender Land* was a momentous event in the history of the formative years of MOT. It was an important historical milepost for the company. In fact, MOT's participation in Matrix:Midland in general reflected not only the stature of this company but also its reach, sinking deep statewide roots.

The second weekend of the festival featured an MOT production of *Madame Butterfly* that featured Kyu Do Park reprising the title character and Detroit-born tenor George Shirley as Pinkerton. Shirley, a Wayne State University graduate, had established a major career by this time having performed in leading opera houses all over the world including the Metropolitan Opera, Covent Garden, Glyndebourne, Buenos Aires, Tokyo, San Francisco and Chicago.

This production of *Madame Butterfly* was staged outdoors in the Dow Gardens and while the decision to go outdoors was a daring gamble, the result was a triumph. The MOT newsletter reported:

The cast and audience of 1000 found out that Mother Nature is an opera lover because she bestowed a perfect June evening on the Puccini proceedings. In fact, she almost stole the show as the setting sun created ever-changing patterns of light on the verdant hills and through wind rustled trees.

Nestled among the maples beside a winding pond (honest!), Beeb Salzer's unit set, previously seen at Music Hall performances, was ingeniously adapted to the natural landscape by Robert Joel Schwartz. Butterfly's first appearance (Puccini intended the best entrance in all of opera for his beloved Cio-Cio-San), emerging slowly over the hill in flowing white, renders all others pale by comparison. (Snow, Michigan)

Opera Canada, in a completely supportive review, was also impressed:

It was a stroke of genius to stage the opera in such a setting. A natural hill made a perfectly raked stage where drama could be played beyond the normal

fringes of the proscenium and the wealthy Yamadori could enter from a real garden with his entourage.

Kyu Do Park, who sang the first MOT production of *Madama Butterfly* several years ago in Detroit, was even better in 1978, proving herself to be a consummate Butterfly—happy, coy, hopeful, bittersweet, desperate and tragic. As Pinkerton, George Shirley, a native Detroiter and renowned tenor, made exactly the impression he's supposed to, in both acting and singing. (Smith, Matrix)

MOT's contribution to Matrix:Midland continued with the Young Artists Program, an intensive five-week training and performing program. In addition to their classes and working on the two MOT productions, the Young Artists performed the world premiere of *Singers*, written especially for MOT by Charles Strouse, composer of the Broadway shows *Bye, Bye Birdie*, *Applause* and *Annie*. Working with emerging singers has always been one of DiChiera's primary interests. *Singers*, composed specifically for the twenty-one singing apprentices who made up the Young Artists Program, is a forty-five minute musical tragic-comedy exploring the fantasy of an opera singer. The musical and dramatic impact is Broadway style but the piece requires operatic voices because of the singing demands. It is essentially a loving look at opera singers much like Michael Bennett's loving look at Broadway dancers in *A Chorus Line*. The MOT newsletter reported:

The premiere performance was exemplary, credit for which goes to director Dominic Missimi's vastly inventive staging, Mark Flint's well paced musical direction, and the fine cast of young artists who

performed with great zest, vigor, and voices, voices, voices. (Snow, Michigan)

Under the direction of coordinator Mark Flint, MOT's resident music director, the twenty-one singers comprised the chorus and supporting roles for the *The Tender Land* and *Madame Butterfly*, the entire cast of *Singers* and were featured in two Evenings of Operatic Scenes. In addition they were given numerous classes in all aspects of operatic performance by the guest faculty. The twenty technical apprentices also received equally valuable training in classes and in key assignments in all the productions. The Young Artists Program was an outstanding example of MOT's commitment to nurturing young operatic talent. The entire experience with the Matrix:Midland festival was indeed an important historical milepost for the young company.

In addition to the experience in Midland, MOT's Opera in Residence had an extensive tour schedule in the spring of 1978 that included residencies in eight Michigan communities all over the state. A production of *Madame Butterfly* was the centerpiece of these residencies, along with a production of *Rita* and a new one-act opera, *Rumpelstiltskin*, composed by David and Karen DiChiera. *Madame Butterfly* featured Kyu Do Park as Butterfly and MOT stalwart Edward Kingins as Pinkerton. Mark Flint was music director and stage director, using his diverse talents

in a residency tour that was much appreciated and well reviewed at every stop.

The new one-act opera *Rumpelstiltskin* is especially notable as it was composed by DiChieras. Created with an elementary school audience in mind it is based on the familiar fairy tale, but the opera departs from tradition by making the title character an outer space elf. The opera was very well received and this excerpt from the Traverse City Record-Eagle was typical of the response:

The "weird" costume and silvery makeup worn in the role by Stephanie Friede, intrigued the young students, and they took great delight in shouting out the villain's name as the heroine, played by Valerie Girard, first tried in vain to guess it.

Questions from the audience indicated the children were also impressed by the "good singing," "How did you get voices like that?" the cast was asked. Training and study, replied Ron Madden, the miller. The prince was played by Evan Bartnick and music director Flint doubled as the "sinister prime minister." (Gamble, Opera)

*Rumpelstiltskin* played throughout the state in the summer of 1978 and was warmly received. It also was produced in Memphis, Tennessee by Opera Memphis and a letter from the General Director captures the response to *Rumpelstiltskin* and even encourages the DiChieras regarding their composition: "How about another?? This one was very well received" (Caswell, DiChiera).

Michigan Opera Theatre's eighth season opened in September 1978 with a new production of Bizet's exotic and rarely performed *The Pearl Fishers*. Leigh Munro was booked to alternate in the role of Leila with Carmen Balthrop. *The Pearl Fishers* also marked the debut of the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra under the baton of resident music director Mark Flint and the production was directed by Dominic Missimi. The Free Press reported that it was "A great opening night at the opera" and the reviewer John Guinn went on to say: "It was easily the most professional combination of talent I have ever seen MOT assemble on the Music Hall stage." Guinn called the singing "consistently splendid" and the sets and costumes, designed by Robert Joel Schwartz were called "appropriately dazzling" (Guinn, great). The reviews were all positive and Opera News stated: "It was a distinct advance over all but a handful of previous MOT outings, with the chorus and particularly the orchestra equaling the impact of the young jobbed-in leads" (Carr, Pearl).

*The Pearl Fishers* was also reviewed by the Cleveland Plain Dealer. In a uniformly positive review the critic, Robert Finn, made a telling statement regarding a larger scope and put MOT's growth and stature into an important national perspective:

Based on what I saw and heard of the Michigan group in Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" last weekend, Detroit seems on the verge of joining Boston, Minneapolis and Dallas among cities that support their

own excellent professional opera companies in addition to a yearly visit from the touring Metropolitan Opera.

There is an important lesson here for Cleveland, which is now somewhat tardily launched in the same direction. It can, indeed, be done. Audiences can be shown that one week of imported opera per year does not fulfill their needs. And they can be lured downtown for the local product. (Finn, Local)

In the building of an institution, a regional opera company, DiChiera was indeed providing an example for other hopeful cities to emulate.

The second production of the season, opening on October 27, 1978, was MOT's first mainstage production of a major American musical, *Showboat*. The musical was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary having opened on December 27, 1927 at the Ziegfield Theatre in New York. It also was the fiftieth anniversary of the Music Hall Theatre where *Showboat* played in 1933. The enthusiasm generated by the popular musical led MOT to expand the schedule to include fourteen performances in order to meet the demand for tickets. Frank Egan was the stage director and was quoted in the Detroit Medical Center News describing his intention of their production: "We've tried to give this production the classical, authentic look that 'Showboat' had when it opened on Broadway in 1927." The article went on to say that "judging from the spirit of the cast and orchestra," the composer "couldn't ask for a better present than the Detroit anniversary production of 'Showboat'" (Persinger, *Showboat*).

Despite the popular support, the production received decidedly mixed reviews from the critics. The Windsor Star review had the headline, "There's a leak in this Showboat." The review stated that while the audience at the production being reviewed "enjoyed it hugely" and that it "will no doubt do brisk business," it "looks suspiciously like a relic" and that this production "seems stuck on a sandbar most of the time" (van Vugt, There's). The Detroit Free Press headline stated that "MOT doesn't do justice to Kern" and said that MOT's *Showboat* "is so misdirected it comes off as a series of embarrassing vaudevillian weaknesses punctuated by soul-stirring songs." The Free Press did have praise for the MOT chorus which "continued giving evidence of their vast improvement" and for the MOT orchestra "under Mark Flint's capable hands" (Guinn, MOT doesn't).

On the positive side the Detroit News said that the production of *Showboat* "proved there's plenty of life in the venerable old girl." The review praised the production department for a "good looking show," Mark Flint and the MOT orchestra and the singers saying the show was "aided by one exceptional performance after another." To summarize, it was called "a tremendously worthwhile production" (Slobojan, Old).

In the middle of this season, three significant events took place in addition to the mainstage season. The volunteer organization, the Michigan Opera Theatre Guild, continued to expand in size and in their

activities. From November 27 to December 11, 1978 the Guild had its first opera tour to Europe. The tour guide for the event was Phyllis Snow who had been involved with the company since 1970, first as a volunteer, then as public relations director and then as a trustee. She was also a member of the Board of Directors of the Detroit Grand Opera Association and the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. A true opera aficionado, Snow was described by Guild Chairperson Roberta Starkweather: "Mrs. Snow's infectious enthusiasm and sheer love of opera make her the perfect person to serve as tour guide" (Farms Resident). This love of opera, her winning personality and seemingly limitless energy not only made Phyllis Snow an ideal tour guide but were also the traits that made her one of the key contributors during the formative years.

Two major changes in MOT's artistic policy were announced on December 11, 1978. First, beginning with the next season, it was announced that MOT would present all its mainstage productions in the fall, from September through late October. The season was slated to feature Carmen Balthrop starring in Scott Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* from September 7 through September 16, followed by Verdi's *Il Trovatore* featuring Metropolitan Opera star Martina Arroyo for five performances from September 24 through September 30. *La Boheme* would be third, from October 8 through October 14 and MOT would close the season with

the first major production in the United States of Tchaikovsky's *Joan of Arc* featuring the Metropolitan Opera's Mignon Dunn alternating in the title role with Canadian Opera star Lynn Vernon for five performances running from October 22 through October 28.

The second major change in artistic policy was by far the most dramatic. For the first time the upcoming 1979 season would include some productions in both the original language and in English. The long running controversy among opera lovers would finally be addressed. In a press release DiChiera explained that these developments "are part of the natural evolution of an innovative company such as ours." This new dual language policy was especially important because it would enable MOT to bring in opera stars from the international opera world. At the time the fact was that many noted European artists either could not or would not sing in English and with the new policy the possibilities for casting would increase dramatically. In the press releases DiChiera explained:

Our company has grown to the point where we can now offer a more diversified season which will meet the demands of a broader audience. Consolidating the season will facilitate the presentation of performing opera in dual languages. I also believe that the concentration of opera within an eight week season will create an exciting cultural challenge for Detroit audiences. (Michigan Opera Theatre)

These developments were important historical milestones for the company. They were further proof that MOT was proactively moving toward the goal of world-class status, opening doors in Europe and around the global opera community.

The third notable activity in the middle of the 1978-79 season was another reminder of DiChiera's skills as a composer. In December of 1978 a song cycle composed by DiChiera and sung by Carmen Balthrop had its premiere in Boston. The following week the song cycle provided the finale to a concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., also sung by Carmen Balthrop, which included works by Strauss, Handel and Mozart. In a glowing review, Paul Hume of the Washington Post referred to DiChiera as "a composer with great sensitivity and a keen awareness of the beauties of the soprano voice" (Hume, Compositions). Somehow DiChiera was able to maintain some focus and energy on composition despite the incredible schedule he was keeping as an impresario.

*La Traviata* was the third offering in the 1978-79 season and opened on January 12, 1979 featuring Catherine Malfitano. When she was in Detroit for *Washington Square*, DiChiera asked her what operas she would like to do, hoping to feature this rising star in a vehicle she would be excited about. "I said 'Traviata' right away," was her response as quoted in the Free Press. "Violetta is the cream of all soprano roles. I can't think of any other role I'd rather sing. I've been wanting to do it for a

long time" (Guinn, Soprano). It was to be yet another highlight, Malfitano's first Violetta, and she received a very favorable response from the critics. This excerpt from the Eccentric newspaper summarizes the response:

The leading role of Violetta was performed by Catherine Malfitano. She gave a sensitive rendering, well-studied and superbly sung, with subtle mood changes in this role of a Paris courtesan turned honorable. This is Ms. Malfitano's debut in this role and her considerable acting abilities prevented the cliché of prostitute with a heart of gold. Her presentation was instead one of proper vulnerability and tragedy.  
(Anderson, Strong)

The production itself received mixed reviews as the critics offered differing opinions. The Detroit News said it lacked "passion" and that it was "a draggy 'Traviata'" (Carr, Passion). While the Eccentric liked the singing, the review felt that; "The stage direction left quite a bit to be desired as it was static and forced" (Anderson, Strong). On the bright side the Detroit Monitor called it "One of MOT's Best" and said that not only did Malfitano "sound great," this *La Traviata* was "All in all, a most enjoyable production" (Delaney, La Traviata). The production also featured soprano Frances Brockington, a native Detroiter, in the role of Violetta's maid Annina. She had participated in Matrix:Midland and this was her second season with MOT. Brockington was also featured in the upcoming revival of *The Emperor Jones* and was very active in the Opera in Residence program. In the upcoming Opera in Residence for the

spring of 1979, she would reprise her role in *La Traviata*, sing the title role in *Little Red Riding Hood* and be featured in *The Wandering Scholar*.

Brockington was yet another example of a quality local talent getting a chance to grow and develop by virtue of the opportunities afforded to her by MOT and DiChiera's continuing interest in developing gifted young voices.

"Michigan Opera Theatre closes season triumphantly" (Smith, Michigan). This headline from the *Eccentric* newspapers summed up the critical response to the double bill of American composer Louis Gruenberg's *The Emperor Jones* and Ruggiero Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* that closed the 1978-79 season. The double bill opened on February 8, 1979, ran for five performances and especially because of *The Emperor Jones*, drew national attention to the Music Hall. Once again DiChiera had created a bill of fare that gained national interest. The production of the very rarely performed *The Emperor Jones* was the first full production of this unique opera in America since the 1946 production by the Chicago Opera Company according to the *New Yorker* in an extensive review that called *The Emperor Jones* "a skillful and imaginative production." The *New Yorker* review also had a good notice for *I Pagliacci* in English, saying that it "came across with unusual emotional force and directness" (Porter, Island). *Variety* called the double bill MOT's "best production to date" and said "the role of the emperor could almost have been written for

Andrew Smith, a burly performer with a rich baritone" (The Emperor). In the Detroit Free Press, John Guinn reported that *I Pagliacci* "brimmed over with delights" and had much praise for Rhoda Levine who directed both operas. Guinn's review called the evening "some of the most satisfying operatic fare in the company's eight seasons," but he, like everyone else, gave most of his attention to *The Emperor Jones*:

MOT's production exposed the work's beauties with a sure hand. Andrew Smith who sang the title role, has a voice that is as big as he is. It's every bit as good as the young William Warfield's was, to whom I suspect he will often be compared. But it was Rhoda Levine's stage direction, combined with Clifford Fears' brilliant choreography that produced the strongest element in the entire production. (Guinn, Lighting)

The legendary Clifford Fears was involved as choreographer and performing the role of Congo Witch Doctor. His presence added an extra measure of interest to the production, as did Mrs. Gruenberg's presence in the audience on opening night. The production was a tremendous success and was a prime example of DiChiera's uncanny knack for innovative and stimulating programming.

The next two seasons were fall seasons, each presenting four productions in September and October. For this 1979 fall season a unique opportunity presented itself and DiChiera took advantage of it. The opening production of the season would be the pre-Broadway tryout of a major revival of *The Most Happy Fella*. The planned production of

*Treemonisha* was put off until the next year. The Broadway bound production would premiere at the Music Hall, opening on September 7, 1979, be taped during the Detroit run for broadcast on PBS nationwide and then go on to New York. The production was slated to feature the formidable Metropolitan Opera bass-baritone Giorgio Tozzi and once again DiChiera had himself and MOT in the middle of the action as associate producers of a major New York production. The revival was produced by Sherwin M. Goldman in association with MOT and Emhan, Inc., which is the Loesser family enterprise. At the time DiChiera explained:

It's a show that I'd wanted to do for a very long time, but it is a VERY expensive undertaking. But this year, Sherwin Goldman, who's from New York and the main producer now, called me, and he'd been looking at it for a long time too, and he wanted to do something with MOT and we both said, 'Why not 'Most Happy Fella'?!'

As a non-profit corporation, we're not in the business of speculation. We have a 10 percent interest in it, but what I did mainly was identify and enlist some Detroit investors for Sherwin Goldman. Our greatest interest in it was in keeping with our interest in American works. Of course, it's important exposure for Michigan Opera Theatre, too. (DeVine, Detroit)

The official opening had to be postponed because, as luck would have it, flooding at the Music Hall caused a delay. The opening went on but the first three performances were designated as previews. The critics' opening was delayed until the following Monday. The flooding reached

several dressing rooms and costumes and some sets were soaked. But the show went on:

By all conventional standards, the revival of Frank Loesser's musical "The Most Happy Fella," last week at the Music Hall, should not have been the outstanding success that it was.

A pipe had burst in the costume room. The intricate scenery had arrived late. The stage was overcrowded. The star was having trouble with his voice. Management had to postpone the review performance for three days.

But what did one see then? A forthrightly acted, beautifully sung, rowdily staged, very well-paced production, with the dancing just about perfect, the scenery moving on split timing and everything just about ready for its Broadway production. (George, 'Most')

The critical response was almost all positive with the Detroit Free Press calling it "most delightful," (DeVine, Most) and while the Detroit News called it "strong," they did pick up on one criticism that seems astute considering how things ended up in New York: "They've come up with a nearly three-hour Italo-American tortoise of a musical that needs to shed some goo so the audience can get to the heart of the cake a little faster" (Hoover, 'Happy'). The Broadway run turned out to be short-lived and aside from Tozzi getting a Tony Nomination, the news was not good from New York. The production got some good press; the Wall Street Journal called it "A Prodigious Outpouring of Well-Sung Melody" (Wilson, Prodigious). Mel Gussow summarized the reaction in the New York Times saying that it was lacking in "real emotion" and that "for all its

sentiment, [it] seems to be short on feeling" (Gussow, Most). *Variety* reported that "'Fella' drew mixed notices and folded after a 53-performance run at the Majestic Theatre, N.Y." (Revival of). All in all, however, it was a great experience for MOT and an exciting way to start the season. As Collins George reported in *Opera Canada* about the production in Detroit, "comparisons between the MOT and the Metropolitan were on everyone's lips as they left the performance" (George, Detroit).

The second production of this 1979 full season, Verdi's *Travatore*, is particularly notable in that it is the first to use the dual-language format with half the performances in Italian and half in English. For the Italian performances DiChiera was able to contract internationally famous soprano Martina Arroyo. The critics raved. John Guinn in the *Free Press* said that MOT "has finally come of age" and singing in Italian was not the only reason. With this production the "local opera strides into the big time," he said. Excerpts from the review:

Monday night's performance was clear evidence that MOT must now be considered a major American opera company. The reasons are many, and the most important are musical ones. MOT's orchestra is now first-rate, and the chorus has been fashioned into one of the best ensembles in the city. The solo voices which graced Monday night's performance were, in nearly every case, equal to the music's demands. Miss Arroyo sang with powerful insight. Her performance of the "Miserere" was the high point of the evening. There were moments when the essence of the operatic art was

so strongly realized that nothing else mattered. (Guinn, Local)

Guinn also reviewed the English cast and gave it high marks too, saying, "Even in translation the intensity survives" (Guinn, Even). Jay Carr of the Detroit News who had been the most persistent critic of English language translation was very enthusiastic in a supportive review saying that the production shows "Detroit is world-class" and stating: "Thus the organization that began as an educational tool of the Metropolitan Opera now has positioned itself to invite comparison to the Met" (Carr, 'Trovatore').

Almost the same enthusiasm marked the next production *La Boheme*, which opened on October 8, 1979. On the negative side, The Detroit News said that the production "needs help" and that "perhaps the production needs more time to prepare. The performance was, to put it softly, rough" (Carr, Boheme needs). The other reviews put a much more positive spin on the criticism with the Eccentric newspapers calling *La Boheme* "splendid in any language" and reporting:

Both the opening night and closing performances of the opera, presented at the Music Hall Center in Detroit, were splendid in their own ways. But the English production Sunday, the last evening, was the more contemporary and intellectual. (Smith, MOT's)

The Free Press called the production a "success" and summarized: "Best of all, there was a conviction about the performance that signaled a

continuance of MOT's advancement toward becoming a major force on the American operatic scene" (Guinn, Opera Theatre).

An ambitious staging of Tchaikovsky's *Joan of Arc* was the final production of the season, featuring Mignon Dunn as Joan. The Detroit News said her performance showed that she "is a major-league voice, especially plangent on top, where it needs to be." And while the review called the production "efficient but not inspired," Jay Carr did admit that with *Joan of Arc*, "MOT mounted a valiant and at times powerful production" (Carr, Joan). John Guinn reported that while the production "was ultimately successful because of the singing," the "weaknesses were glaring" (Guinn, Orchestra). The Detroit Monitor on the other hand said the production was "a sumptuous feast of visual audio stimulation" (Persinger, Sumptuous). Finally, as if to sum up the season, the Eccentric newspaper stated: "Let it be noted that Michigan Opera Theatre has concluded its ninth season firmly established as a company of national stature" (Joan of).

This season got a lot of attention for many reasons, especially the dual-language policy and the appearance on the Music Hall stage of Martina Arroyo and Mignon Dunn. The presence of these two established professionals was an indication that MOT was moving to another level. John Guinn of the Free Press summarized the enthusiasm:

**Martina Arroyo's appearance in "Il Trovatore" is a case in point. With the round fullness of her first high note in Act I's "Tacea la notte," it was obvious MOT was in the big leagues, that the audience was witnessing a brand of singing the company had not been able to achieve before. (Guinn, Quality)**

**While John Guinn was a tough critic regarding the performances he was a constant supporter of MOT and of DiChiera's quest to build a regional opera company:**

**Make no mistake about it, MOT is off and running, and edging towards the big leagues. The person most responsible for its emergence as a major operatic force is its general director, David DiChiera. In less than a decade, he has made locally produced opera a viable commodity for the metropolitan Detroit community. (Guinn, Quality)**

**The critics are an important part of the mix. The role of the critic was discussed in a major article in the Detroit News Magazine by feature writer Christopher Wilcox: "They are a barometer of educated opinion and a means of communication with the wider opera world." Wilcox went on to explain that; "New York critics will never take MOT seriously until Detroit critics do. So national recognition cannot be achieved without local support." Despite the fact that the artists are sometimes stung by the reviews, they serve an important function. Detroit's two major critics at the time, John Guinn and Jay Carr, were known for being tough to please and indeed they were. The role of the critic is an important one,**

however, and in his feature in the Detroit News Magazine, writer Christopher Wilcox helped to explain this role:

Detroit critics wield only minimal power at the MOT box office. Most tickets are sold weeks ahead by subscription, and loyal audiences return every year regardless of notices. But MOT's general director is acutely conscious of reviews, nonetheless.

Detroit's two major music critics are considered tough to please. Unlike critics in other towns, who tend to boost their local product or make allowances for it, Carr and Guinn refuse to call inferior work by any other name, even from a "growing" or "maturing" company. (Wilcox, Splendor)

Despite the fact that Guinn and Carr were tough critics, it is clear from the body of their work, which includes feature articles and related stories along with the production reviews, that they were both big supporters of DiChiera and what he was trying to achieve. It was clear that both critics wanted MOT to succeed and that they were, like everyone else connected to what was happening at the Music Hall, enthusiastic about MOT's future.

As plans for MOT's next season were coming into focus, Wilcox also articulated the overall situation at MOT very effectively. MOT was definitely in transition, still exploring the American repertory and presenting little known and experimental works, and at the same time bringing in established stars like Arroyo and Dunn to begin the process of becoming a company capable of full-fledged grand opera. Wilcox described the situation:

**So there is confusion at the Music Hall about what the MOT should be. Should it continue, as DiChiera publicly insists, to emphasize opera as theater in order to build and educate a new audience for the art? Or should it build the international casts and lavish productions that fill Masonic Auditorium when the Met comes to town? (Wilcox, Splendor)**

**The answer was that MOT would be both. During this transition period that would last until 1985, MOT would grow steadily and would position itself to be ready when the Met Tour ceased to exist. At that time MOT would be the only game in town, operatically speaking, and as a respected professional regional opera company, DiChiera would be able to offer a full range of operatic fare, from grand opera of the first order to American musical theatre and the seldom-performed works. As MOT's tenth season approached it is clear that DiChiera was heading in the right direction.**

**For Michigan Opera Theatre, and for DiChiera, 1979 was truly an eventful year. Fundraising and volunteer events and efforts were taking place at an ever-increasing pace. The decline of the Met Tour was getting headlines and with its decline the stage was being set for MOT's rise in influence and stature. In addition, by the end of the year DiChiera was elected President of OPERA America and he was named a Michiganiaan of the Year by the Detroit News.**

**In June of 1979 a major benefit dinner dance took place at the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House hosted by Alex and Barbara Wrigley and**

David and Karen DiChiera. At \$300 per couple, the tickets for the black-tie event, which was limited to fifty couples, were sold out within a week after the invitations were mailed. This prestigious event was yet another benefit party which would not only build enthusiasm for MOT, but would also result in serious money being raised for the company's expanding slate of activities.

The Michigan Opera Theatre Guild, MOT's volunteer organization, also continued its growth with an expanding schedule of creative events and efforts to benefit MOT. May 17, 1979 was the date of the Guild sponsored, second annual Pub Crawl. After a very successful first year, there was much anticipation for Pub Crawl II. MOT supporters rode busses called "Suds Express" to and from participating downtown taverns. The taverns supplied the entertainment and donated a percentage of their income to MOT. The MOT Guild, under the dedicated leadership of stalwart Chairmen Robert and Dick Starkweather rented busses, printed buttons, sold t-shirts, plotted all the logistics and handled the financial arrangements.

The Guild also worked with MOT in a variety of other ways, supporting the company in whatever ways they could, doing whatever was needed. One good example was providing hospitality, transportation and social outlets for performers, musicians, technicians and support staff who came to Detroit from all parts of the country. This was especially

important because it provided the personal touch, helping to create the sense of family that both DiChiera's had worked hard to establish. Also the Guild administered and staffed a unique venture called the Michigan Opera Theatre Boutique, which was located on the first level of the Renaissance Center. The Boutique was managed by Guild President Roberta Starkweather and of course, the profits went to support MOT. A whole range of opera-related items such as books, records, posters, shirts, jewelry and other gift items were offered in a setting decorated with actual opera props. It was another example of the creative efforts of this dedicated group of volunteers who had a sense of ownership with regards to the company and devoted much time to supporting their beloved MOT. The fundamental importance of the volunteer organization cannot be overstated. Building and nurturing a caring group such as this one is absolutely critical for any budding performing arts organization.

The Met Tour was going through difficult times in 1979, suffering from the same challenging financial climate that faced all arts organizations. Even the mighty Metropolitan Opera was having difficulties financing all their activities, especially the incredibly expensive Met Tour. Increased funding was needed and the DGOA was faced with raising ticket prices to offset the increases. It was not just a raise in the ticket prices that was causing the difficulty. If patrons were willing to make a donation, they would get priority seating as a benefit. This

situation caused some bad feelings and a major feature on the subject appeared in the Free Press describing how "longtime supporters are disgruntled about what they consider unjust practices coming from" the DGOA:

A small but vociferous revolt is going on among the jeweled and furred gentry who patronize the annual visit of the Metropolitan Opera to Detroit. Some of these people, who have supported the Met since it first came to Detroit in 1959, say they are being summarily shunted aside in favor of newer folk who are willing to cough up more cash in order to assure themselves of better seating.

Now they are being hit for larger and larger donations. And if they don't up the ante, they are being uprooted from their choice seats by the Detroit Grand Opera Association, which sponsors the Met's visit each year. They're as mad about that as *Lucia di Lammermoor* on her wedding night. (Guinn, Your)

Essentially, the DGOA was in a very difficult, no-win situation. With the escalating costs of the Met Tour they had to find ways to bring in more money. At the same time the perception among longtime supporters was that they were being treated unfairly and many were dropping their season tickets. There were two factors at work. The "unfair treatment" was one factor and the stature of MOT as an alternative was the other. Several disgruntled DGOA supporters were quoted in the Free Press feature anonymously since they didn't want their names used for fear of jeopardizing their preferred status and thereby losing their good seats at the Masonic Auditorium. One former Met Tour patron was quoted and

provided an excellent summary of the declining fortunes of the Met Tour and the ascendance of MOT as a legitimate alternative:

I am now completely sold on the productions put on by Michigan Opera Theatre. For years I have been unsatisfied with the Met productions which come to Detroit. They send out one or two big voices, but a great many of the leading roles are sung by has-beens.

Also, the way the Met produces opera leaves a great deal to be desired. Their productions are done as enormous tableaux, and the real dramatic experience of opera is lost. (Guinn, Yours)

The Met Tour would continue to experience difficulty and MOT would continue to grow, establishing a vital bond with the community. DiChiera was keenly aware of the developing situation and was continuing to build the support for MOT. When the Met Tour ended, MOT would be ready to become the operatic resource for greater Detroit and Michigan as a highly regarded, full-time professional regional opera company.

By the end of the year, in December 1979, the announcement was made that DiChiera was elected President of OPERA America at its annual meeting in Miami. From 1979 to 1983 he led this organization at one of the most critical times in its history. His tenure as president was exceptional. Under his leadership, the national organization established a major initiative in opera education programs throughout the country. In the area of public information he encouraged OPERA America to focus on strategies to help generate a positive image and interest in opera for a

greater portion of the population. He developed and served as chairman for two years of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund/Opera for a New America program that encouraged companies to reach previously under-addressed segments of the population.

One other exceptional OPERA America program is particularly notable. DiChiera spearheaded a major project called Opera for the 80s and Beyond. The program developed bold, innovative ways of encouraging and funding new American musical theatre works. The project was primarily supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. As a direct result of support from Opera for the 80s and Beyond, many notable works received their premieres, including *The Aspen Papers*, *Rasputin*, *Nixon in China*, *McTeague*, *The Secret Garden* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*. DiChiera was in the key leadership position at OPERA America at a critical time in its history and his tenure was exemplary. He remains active on the national scene to this day, with his stature as one of the key leaders in the regional opera company movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century firmly in place.

The Detroit News named DiChiera a Michiganiaan of the Year in 1979 recognizing his contributions to the greater statewide community. The plaque he received hangs in his office and states that the award was "in recognition of significant activity pursued with excellence, zest and

dedication, thereby making Michigan a more habitable place for all its citizens." With this prestigious award and considering his position as president of OPERA America, DiChiera clearly had established himself and his opera company in Michigan and on the national scene. In the Free Press, John Guinn summarized: "Make no mistake about it, MOT is off and running, and edging toward the big leagues. The person most responsible for its emergence as a major operatic force is David DiChiera" (Guinn, Quality).

The 1980 Opera in Residence program featured Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* in residence in Escanaba, Utica, Alpena and Algonac in March and May. This was followed by a highly successful production in June of 1980 of *The Pearl Fishers* as part of the Matrix:Midland Festival. This tour production played outdoors in the Dow Gardens and once again Mother Nature cooperated with a nice evening.

The heart of the 1980 mainstage season, another fall season, included twenty-one performances of four productions; *Die Fledermaus*, a major American opera *Of Mice and Men*, *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto* (with two performances in Italian). To launch the season the opera party tradition continued with a lavish Masked Ball at the Book Cadillac Hotel on September 5, 1980. Another special event, a dinner and a special performance of *Die Fledermaus*, took place on September 20 as an opportunity to offer a chance for representatives from across the state of

Michigan to celebrate MOT's tenth anniversary season. In light of the fact that MOT's first decade of achievement was of such great benefit not only to the city of Detroit but also to many people across the state as well, MOT Chairman Lynn Townsend felt strongly that out-state friends and supporters should be included in the celebration of the tenth anniversary. September 20, 1980 was designated Michigan Night at MOT. Invitations were extended to all state legislators as well as representatives from across the state. Mrs. Robert Hamady of Flint and Mrs. Lynn Townsend jointly chaired the event which included dinner at the University Club, the special performance of *Die Fledermaus*, followed by a champagne reception at the end of the evening.

There was one other major event in the fall of 1980 which took place on November 16 in Ford Auditorium. The event was a special concert featuring two major stars of the opera world, Franco Corelli and Jerome Hines. These two stars joined forces to present a concert that was a benefit for MOT. This kind of special event was both a great artistic endeavor and an outstanding opportunity to raise money for MOT's ever-expanding slate of activities.

The 1980 season opened with a production of *Die Fledermaus* which DiChiera spiced up by including noted Detroit-born tenor George Shirley, show business legend Imogene Coca in the pants role of Prince Orlofsky, Coca's husband King Donovan as the drunken jailer and once

again, State Senator Jack Faxon. Directed by Dominic Missimi and conducted by Mark Flint, the production was very positively received. There was some criticism of the MOT orchestra and while everyone appreciated Faxon's support of the arts in the legislature, virtually every critic criticized his performance. On the whole, however, the production received support from all corners.

The second opera of the 1980 fall season was a complete change of pace and was critically acclaimed. Jay Carr said in the *Detroit News*: "Carlisle Floyd's 'Of Mice and Men' is quite simply one of the best things the Michigan Opera Theatre has done" (Carr, One). For the lead role DiChiera contracted Robert Moulson, who created the role of Lennie when *Of Mice and Men* had its world premiere with the Seattle Opera Company in 1970. MOT's production also got a fine notice in *Opera News* and the *Detroit Free Press* headline read: "MOT's 'Mice' merits roars of approval" (Guinn, MOT's 'Mice'). DiChiera brought in the composer himself, Carlisle Floyd, to direct the production, which gave the proceedings a distinct measure of authenticity. John DeMain conducted this highly rated production.

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* met with mixed reviews. It was clear that this was a production where the singing was the strong point as virtually every reviewer echoed the headline in Jay Carr's review in the *Detroit News*: "Fine young leads propel a spirited 'Don Giovanni'" (Carr, Fine).

Wilhelmenia Fernandez was singled out for praise as Donna Elvira, as was Detroit Mary Callaghan Lynch as Zerlina and just about everyone else in the cast. Veteran Andreas Poulimenos as the title character who, despite previous successes, was apparently not up to this unique role. After the Music Hall run the production moved to Kalamazoo for a tour performance and the Gazette review said that while there were many "pluses" Poulimenous was "one big minus." The review stated; "he was a Don without color or magnetism, and this created a great empty hole at the center of the opera" (Heintz, Giovanni).

The Detroit Free Press review of *Don Giovanni* felt that what was good about this production "was mostly aural." While it called Poulimenos "surprisingly bland," the review had high marks for the other singers, especially Wilhelmenia Fernandez:

There was a splendid Donna Elvira, Wilhelmenia Fernandez. She tended to force her soprano a bit on top, but her coloratura was secure, and she imbued her voice with real characterization which, considering the stage direction, was quite a feat. (Guinn, Staging)

The review came down pretty hard on the staging and the setting, however, with a headline that read, "Staging flaws mar 'Giovanni'," and criticism of the setting that called the set "overbearing" and said it "totally overpowered the Music Hall stage." In all, while there were some good things, the Free Press felt it "could not be called a major operatic achievement" (Guinn, Staging).

MOT came back strong with its final production of the fall 1980 season, *Rigoletto*. A dual-language production, *Rigoletto* met with rave reviews across the board. It was "A 'Rigoletto' to be remembered" according to the Free Press, and in his review John Guinn had high praise for conductor W. Anthony Waters and director Rhonda Levine.

The following excerpt expresses Guinn's enthusiasm:

There was not a seriously weak element in the entire production. The singing was consistently beautiful. The stage direction was unfalteringly right. The conductor transformed the MOT orchestra into a supple, sully professional ensemble. The sets suited the stage. The costumes suited the characters. The lighting enhanced both.

It was a miraculous experience, so secure in all its aspects that you could lean back and enjoy every measure, without ever having to compromise. (Guinn, 'Rigoletto')

W. Anthony Waters was making his second appearance with MOT, having conducted the last season's critically acclaimed *Il Traviatore*. This talented young conductor had served as musical assistant to Kurt Herbert Adler at the San Francisco Opera, among his many other credits, and would return many times to conduct MOT productions. Of his work for *Rigoletto*, John Guinn reported that Waters "provided the strongest support heard from the Music Hall stage this season, drawing energized, buoyant playing" from the MOT orchestra (Guinn, 'Rigoletto'). Rhoda Levine as stage director was back for her third MOT production and also received much positive press. In a supportive Oakland Press review

which said that this *Rigoletto* "does MOT proud," Levine was singled out: "Time and again, Ms. Levine moves the opera away from flat-footed singing into real theatre." The review went on: "Throughout, Ms. Levine goes into the action with a sense of drama and supports the musical line with relevant stage movement" (Margolin, 'Rigoletto'). In the *Detroit News*, Jay Carr was also positive:

The *Rigoletto* that unfolded Friday night at the Music Hall was very much in what one has come to think of as the Michigan Opera Theatre mold. It featured young leads and a certain degree of rawness, but also much liveliness and refreshingly cogent direction. Across the board, it was the strongest performance of the season. (Carr, handsome)

Liveliness and refreshingly cogent direction were apt descriptions of a fundamental part of MOT's character. It describes what people were drawn to, making MOT's remarkable growth possible. DiChiera had created an identity and established a fundamental connection with his community, but did not rest on his laurels. This was only a beginning as the activities and the growth would continue at an extraordinary pace.

The annual Opera in Residence was the first challenge of 1981. *Die Fledermaus* was the featured production in residence in St. Clair Shores, Utica and Alpena. This year's program also featured performances of Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti* as well as several performances of *Under One Roof*, a musical review about family life for young people by Karen DiChiera and Joan Hill. In April of 1981 MOT

joined forces with the DSO in two performances of Beethoven's *Fidelio* which were favorably received by the critics. Antal Dorati was on the podium for the performances at Ford Auditorium.

An interesting opportunity presented itself in late April of 1981 when DiChiera accepted the position of Artistic Director of the Dayton Opera. He went to Dayton following a controversy that included the previous general director's termination, followed by the resignation of thirteen board members. In essence DiChiera went to help restore the troubled company. From 1982 through 1993 DiChiera led a dramatic turn-around that started with a twenty-five percent increase in season ticket sales in his first year. His tenure at Dayton included the first time the company had multiple performances of an opera. There was also a dramatic turn-around in the critical response to the company's new artistic standards. Under DiChiera's artistic stewardship, Dayton Opera developed the distinction of having the largest subscriber base of any opera company in Ohio. He had a knack for wearing more than one hat. Because of his unique situation he was able to develop a close working relationship between Dayton Opera and MOT which was to the benefit of both companies. A gala salute was held in DiChiera's honor during the party scene of his final production for Dayton Opera, *Die Fildermaus*. It was a very successful tenure.

MOT's 1981-82 mainstage season enlarged to five productions and was a return to the fall and winter, split season format. The fall of 1981 included the first in a series of national operas from outside the Italian, French and German mainstream, which garnered international attention and stimulated the support and participation of unique ethnic communities in the greater Detroit area and around the country. The fall part of the season featured the American premiere of *Anoush* by Armenian composer Armen Tigranian. MOT opened the season with a dual-language production of Puccini's *Tosca* featuring the return of Nancy Shade in the title role. Shade first performed with MOT in 1971, in Puccini's *La Rondine* and then went on to an active international career. Willie Anthony Waters was back on the podium for his third straight MOT season and Sarah Ventura returned to stage direct her third MOT production. It was a highly-rated production which had six performances at the Music Hall. The second production of the 1981-82 season, Bizet's *Carmen*, also had six performances with two established performers, Victoria Vergara and Cynthia Munzer alternating in the title role. Glenda Kirkland was Micaela. This Julliard and University of Michigan graduate was on the faculty of Eastern Michigan University. Mark Flint, in his fifth season with MOT, was on the podium for a production which received mixed reviews from the critics.

The big event of the fall season was the American premiere of *Anoush*, which opened on October 30, 1981. Tigranian's opera was written in 1910 and tells the story of a young village girl driven to madness by a feud between her brother and her lover. The production got a nice notice in the New York Times. The review had praise for DiChiera's idea of producing national operas of countries outside of the operatic mainstream calling it "a potentially fertile new supply of repertory." The review called the production "an honorable one," and said "the opera as a whole remains charming and unusual" (Rockwell, Opera).

DiChiera contracted Gerald Papasian as stage director and translator for MOT's *Anoush*. Papasian was trained at Armenia State Fine and Dramatic Arts Institute in what was then the Soviet Union, and at both the Moscow and Leningrad Theatre Workshops. After several seasons with the Armenian Theatre Company in Cairo, Egypt, he moved on to London, Paris and then Los Angeles, where among other things, he had recently been in a film which was shot in Detroit. DiChiera, knowing of his background, asked him to translate *Anoush* into English, a job which took him twelve months.

The idea for *Anoush* was originally a suggestion to DiChiera by MOT subscriber Alice Haidostian. Mrs. Haidostian also took the lead in

the Armenian community raising significant funds to help with the production. DiChiera was quoted in the *Anoush* program notes:

For a long time I have believed that Detroit, given its generous mixture of nationalities and an enthusiastic musical community, is a natural location for the Michigan Opera Theatre to mount a series of major nationalistic operas. The very nature of opera enables the audience to experience a panorama of the cultural elements that distinguish one nationality from another. (DiChiera, *Anoush*)

By all accounts the production was a big success. While the opera itself was not highly regarded, the production was. John Guinn said that "MOT has fashioned a first-rate production of a minor work" (Guinn, Minor). In the News, Jay Carr was even more impressed, reporting about Ellen Kerrigan in the title role; "from start to finish, she was remarkable." Carr also had praise for the conductor Raffi Armenian whose "sure handed conducting was several welcome notches above the MOT standard," and in his review summarized the production:

In all respects, the staging was one of the best the MOT has done. Its freshness, color, vigor and impassioned commitment made a forceful and resplendent case for *Anoush* as an exportable opera and more than justified the loyal support - \$42,000 of the \$200,000 cost – provided by Detroit's Armenian community. (Carr, trial)

All in all it was a bold new strategy and a very successful production. As Jay Carr's review said, it was; "A trial balloon [that] soars beyond

expectation." Once again DiChiera's knack for adventurous programming hit the mark.

Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* was next in the 1981-82 season with a January 15, 1982 opening. The cast featured several local performers. Mary Callaghan Lynch was featured in the role of Yum-Yum and noted Detroit actor Robert Grossman was cast as the Lord High Executioner. Yum-Yum's schoolgirl friends were played by Rochelle Rosenthal, a Detroit performer who had moved on to New York and Sue LaDuke Wiley, another Detroit area performer who had experience with MOT's touring company. The Free Press had some trouble with the staging by Dorothy Frank Danner but said that the singing was "uniformly good throughout." The review singled out Mary Callaghan Lynch and said her "sweet soprano joins with her controlled characterization to capture Yum-Yum's innocence faithfully" (Guinn, *Mikado's*). In the Detroit News Jay Carr called *The Mikado* "a respectable and often entertaining effort" (Carr, *Mikado*).

To close the season, MOT earned all around high marks for its second production of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, which opened on January 29, 1982. MOT's first *Porgy and Bess* was an adaptation, as they had to use the Ella Gerber version, which is actually quite different from the Gershwin original. By 1982 the rights had been released and DiChiera and conductor Randolph Mauldin went back to the original,

trimmed it judiciously and came up with a two hour and forty minute version that played to positive critical acclaim from all quarters. The Eccentric newspapers said: "A strong cast makes a winner" (Doerr, strong). The Free Press reported that, "MOT's production achieved the right mixture of respect and free-wheeling spirit," and said that the production was "a glowing tribute to Gershwin's genius that will stand as one of the company's finest efforts" (Guinn, Bravo). The singers, Donnie Ray Albert as Porgy, Wilhelmenia Fernandez as Bess, Gregg Baker as Crown and Clyde Williams as Sportin' Life all were well received, with Jay Carr reporting in the News, "I can't remember when MOT has had so many compelling voices on the same stage at the same time." Carr went on to say that, "In Louis Johnson's praiseworthy staging and James Stone's meticulously ramshackle set," this production of Porgy and Bess "does MOT proud" (Carr, 'Porgy' does). The production was so popular that MOT had to book an extra week of performances.

In early 1982, as the mainstage season was ending, MOT's community program activities were in full swing. The Opera in Residence program was now in its eighth year and the 1982 version featured a full production of *Madame Butterfly*. There were residencies in St. Clair Shores, Ypsilanti, Rochester, Utica and Mt. Clemens. Karen DiChiera, as director of community programs, led the way along with John Finck who had become director of productions. A relatively new member of the staff

was Suzanne Acton. She had been involved in the Young Artist Intern program and was now part of the music staff for community programs, serving as coach/accompanist for that year's Opera in Residence tour. This formidable young woman came with impressive credentials, a Bachelors degree in music from the University of Michigan and Masters degrees in piano performance, vocal coaching and accompanying from Wayne State University and the University of Illinois. She had coached for the San Diego Opera Theatre and the Opera Theatre of St. Louis and had served on the faculty of Florida State University's Opera Department. Before returning to Detroit to work with MOT she worked as a coach/accompanist in New York. Acton, an exceptionally talented artist and musician, found a professional home at MOT and before long worked her way up the ladder to become chorus master and assistant music director, also conducting several mainstage productions along the way. Acton and MOT were a good match and she remains a major force with the company today, over twenty years later.

Opera in Residence was just one program in an all-out effort to make opera accessible to as many people as possible. MOT, under Karen DiChiera's leadership in the community programs department, developed a whole range of other programs. Overture to Opera was one of these programs. Using the company's original name, the new Overture to Opera was MOT's touring company which worked year-round, giving

gifted Detroit singers, musicians and stage technicians experience in a full range of production opportunities including children's theatre productions, Broadway reviews, storytelling, master classes and a variety of short works intended to show that opera is enlightening entertainment. The community programs department also included MOT's Tapes for the Blind, a program that produced tapes of the readings from the program books so that sight-impaired opera lovers could be exposed to opera plots and all other relevant information. Other activities included programs for senior citizens, a Black Outreach Program, Arts Accessibility for the Handicapped, a media program that developed a radio series through the Detroit Public Schools radio station and a documentary film.

There was one other notable tour activity in the spring of 1982. MOT was invited to the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. to participate in their Imagination Festival. For this festival MOT prepared a production of *Alice in Wonderland* that played for twelve performances at the Kennedy Center in April of 1982.

The mainstage season for 1982-83 was slated as a fall and winter season of five productions. Opening the season was the second in the series of nationalistic operas, the American premiere of Polish composer Stanislaw Moniuszko's *The Haunted Castle*. This was followed by *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *The Sound of Music*, MOT's second mainstage production of a major American musical. For the winter part of the season

MOT produced *The Marriage of Figaro* and the season came to a close with *Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin.

In producing *The Haunted Castle*, DiChiera was not only exploring unfamiliar repertoire. With this production he had found a way to tap metropolitan Detroit's substantial Polish community. Once again DiChiera was exhibiting his uncanny knack for timely programming. From the Polish Daily News:

The timing is perfect. A Polish pope, a Polish archbishop in Detroit, a Polish Nobel Prize winner, a Polish art wing in the Detroit Institute of Arts as the first of its kind in a major art institute outside of Poland. Now, add another first: the first Polish opera to be produced and staged by any opera company in the United States. (Horkey, Timing)

The production of *The Haunted Castle* created tremendous enthusiasm in the Polish community. Moniuszkio, who is considered the father of Polish opera, created an opera with beautiful music and many colorful scenes depicting Polish life and tradition. The opera includes lively dance numbers which also enhance its nationalistic character. The patriotism is so apparent that the opera was banned from performance during the nineteenth century Czarist occupation of Poland. A Polish Opera Committee was formed and Dr. Zofra Drozdowska-Kafarski, as chairwoman, led a fundraising effort which raised \$80,000 to contribute to the production costs. DiChiera brought in a production team made up mostly of noted Polish artists led by conductor Janek Kasprzyk and

director Wojciech Haik, which gave the production an extra measure of authenticity.

*The Haunted Castle* (*Straszny Dwor* in Polish) was very positively received by the critics, and received much attention in the greater opera community and the national press. The New Yorker called it "a captivating piece, one that should be in the City Opera repertory" and said that the producing of nationalist operas outside the mainstream was one of MOT's "specialties." The review said that despite some flaws "the performance had verve, and the work is irresistible" (Porter, Rake). The Cleveland Plain Dealer called it a "Fine Polish opera" and said it "adds its charm to the Detroit scene." The all around supportive review talked about MOT's success in the search for new audiences:

One of the most innovative tactics in that search that I know of is the Michigan Opera Theater's cultivation of the ethnic groups that make up so large a part of the 4.3 million population of Greater Detroit. Based on the results so far, MOT's strategy obviously has artistic as well as commercial validity. (Finn, Fine)

While there was some disagreement on the quality of the opera itself, there was a great deal of positive support for the production. Opera News explained that it was clear that "a lot of love and work went into this *Haunted Castle*" (Carr, Detroit 1983), and the Free Press reported: "Musical talent gives heart to MOT's 'Haunted Castle'." The Free Press also had good words for the new chorus master: "Suzanne Acton also

deserves accolades. Her chorus sang with fervor and conviction, adding needed vitality to the production every time they opened their mouths" (Guinn, Musical).

"MOT hits the jackpot again" (Carr, MOT). This headline from the Detroit News sums up the positive response to the second production of the season, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which opened on October 15, 1982. Strong voices were the foundation of this production along with the well-received overall musical presentation led by Mark Flint on the podium. John Guinn had this to say about the leading lady:

Friday night MOT had a Lucia whose technical capacity matched every demand of the music. Mariella Devia, making her MOT debut, produced rock-solid pitch and impeccably executed trills, turns, scales and arpeggios. She had a consistent vocal security that was dazzling. (Guinn, Strong)

Opera News was in agreement calling Mariella Devia "a major-league lyric coloratura, with a voice of remarkable purity" (Carr, Detroit 1983).

The third production of the season was Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, which opened on November 12, 1982 and featured Carmen Balthrop in the title role. The production got tremendous support from greater Detroit's African American community and the Michigan Chronicle hosted the opening night gala premiere and sponsored the Sunday, November 14 performance as well. Indeed, this production was a Detroit premiere

and along with being such a rarely performed work, *Treemonisha* generated a great deal of interest.

DiChiera contracted Cuban-born conductor Tania Leon to lead the forces from the pit. She had recently conducted the Broadway production of *The Wiz*, was an active orchestral conductor and had plans to conduct for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. This was the first time she conducted *Treemonisha*. While John Guinn in the Free Press felt it was a disappointment, most of the critical response was decidedly positive. The Michigan Chronicle reported: "The fine casting and staging by Michigan Opera Theatre on this important Detroit premiere was met with a warm reception by the large audience" (Nolan, Wheels). In general the singing was very favorably reviewed. In the lead, Carmen Balthrop, who had sung the role in Houston and on Broadway, had quite an impact. In the Detroit News, Jay Carr called the production "A buoyant time with Joplin" and said "the cast members poured themselves into it with sunny verve." Excerpts from his review tell the tale, starting with Carmen Balthrop:

She behaves like a saint and sings like an angel, with glistening top notes. She's the kind of woman any red-blooded man would go to school for. The dancing is terrific – hot, graceful, exuberant. It enhances the light, folksy atmosphere. If this lilting finale doesn't reach you, you're quite probably dead. (Carr, buoyant)

*Treemonisha* carries a message of goodwill and spiritual dignity. The orchestration is by early American music expert Gunther Schuller and overall the opera was very well received.

Beginning the New Year the season's fourth production, Mozart's masterpiece *The Marriage of Figaro*, opened on January 14, 1983 and despite a rather unimpressive set, garnered a set of mostly positive reviews for its strong cast. Fresh from her critically acclaimed film *Diva*, Wilhelmenia Fernandez was back to sing the lead role and the Windsor Star review ran the headline: "Plucky soprano steals *The Marriage of Figaro*" (van Vugt, Plucky). While there was some consensus that her top notes were less than perfect, overall the performance was very well received. In the Free Press, the headline read: "'Marriage of Figaro' weds strong cast to cheap set" (Guinn, Marriage) and in the News, Jay Carr summarized, saying that this production of *The Marriage of Figaro* was "one of the most tasteful looking and satisfyingly daring I have seen" (Carr, daring).

MOT's 1983 Opera in Residence also featured *The Marriage of Figaro*. The schedule went from February 28 through April 29 and included residencies in St. Clair Shores, Pontiac, Mt. Clemens, Warren, New Baltimore and Flint. Suzanne Acton was music director and the production featured, as usual, talented Detroit area singers. The staging

was based on the Music Hall production and the traveling company used basically the same set.

The positive reviews continued with the final production of the season: "'Sound of Music' returns in all its wholesome glory." That was the headline in the Free Press review that called this production "a splendid revival" (DeVine, Sound). Featuring Broadway actress Judy Kaye as Maria, the rest of the cast was made up of Detroit artists and MOT veterans including Phil Marcus Esser, David Fox, Coleen Mary Downey, Jan Albright and Robert Grossman. Calling this production the "Best of MOT's Season," the Detroit Monitor reported that it was too bad there were not more performances because it was "three hours of excellent, moving musical comedy" (Persinger, Sound). The production did brisk business and closed February 12, 1983.

There is one other note with regards to *The Sound of Music* which was a hint of what was to come for MOT. An article in the Free Press dated June 25, 1982 revealed, for the first time, that DiChiera was talking with the Nederlander Organization about the possibilities of presenting *The Sound of Music* in either the Fisher Theatre or the Masonic Temple Auditorium. The reality of the situation was simple. DiChiera was quoted: "If we do 'Sound of Music' with the kind of quality it needs, that means high overhead and the potential gross is stronger at either of those houses" (House-hunt). The Music Hall is a 1,790 seat theatre. The Fisher

has 2,200 seats and the Masonic has 4,500 seats. Due to the dramatic increase in the number of seats available for ticket sales, MOT could simply make much more money in the larger theatres. These negotiations did not work out for *The Sound of Music*, which had its run at the Music Hall, but the seed was planted and the concept of moving to the Masonic and Fisher was a strategy whose time was at hand.

After intensive strategic planning which took place during the course of 1982, DiChiera and MOT were ready to make the big announcement regarding the 1983-84 season. It would be called "The Season of Excellence" and along with three fall productions at the Music Hall, MOT would move to the Masonic Temple Auditorium for a spring 1984 production of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* starring the legendary Dame Joan Sutherland in the title role. "La Stupenda" was joining forces with MOT for its first truly grand opera in the Masonic Temple. It was a stunning announcement. Once again DiChiera created a huge public relations buzz. The presence of Dame Joan Sutherland, with her husband Richard Bonyngne conducting in the Masonic Temple Auditorium, suddenly catapulted Michigan Opera Theatre to a whole new level. Shortly after this, in March of 1984, the announcement was made that MOT would also be moving its fall productions to the Fisher Theatre. The planned strategic growth for MOT, along with the financial reality of the dramatically increased ticket income made moving into the larger theatres

a necessity. Indeed these events would mark the end of Michigan Opera Theatre's formative years. It was during the 1974 through 1983 time span that Michigan Opera Theatre would become recognized as a legitimate entity in the cultural milieu of greater metropolitan Detroit and Michigan. As this crucial 1974 through 1983 gestation period came to a close, MOT had earned its status as the professional operatic resource in the region.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **1983-1985**

There are four primary events which marked the culmination of MOT's formative years. The first was the announcement of the 1983-84 season which featured a move to the Masonic Temple Auditorium for a spring production of *Anna Bolena* starring the legendary Dame Joan Sutherland. The production is also notable in that it featured the Midwest premiere of surtitles, the new technology that would finally settle the "English versus original language" debate. The second event was the announcement of MOT's new strategic plan which charted the company's intended growth. The third event was the announcement of MOT's move to the Fisher Theatre for its fall seasons and the last was the announcement of the end of the Met Tour in Detroit.

The 1983-84 season had plenty of star power. First was a dual-language production of *La Traviata* featuring Metropolitan Opera star Benita Valente alternating with young Greek soprano Jenny Drivala making her American debut as Violetta. The production, which opened on October 14, 1983, received generally good reviews although the younger singers in the second cast came in for some criticism due in large part to

their vocal and dramatic immaturity. The second opera for the fall part of the season, Gounod's *Faust*, opened on November 4, 1983 featuring Wilhelmenia Fernandez and tenor Vinson Cole. This production also received generally supportive reviews. The musical component of *Faust* was especially effective with the singers and conductor W. Anthony Waters all getting great notices in the press. The production was also notable because for two of the performances Detroit area sign language teachers Mary Wells and John Ray, positioned at the side of the stage, used sign language to interpret the performance for the hearing impaired.

The final production of the fall part of the season was a production of the Tony award-winning Stephen Sondheim musical *A Little Night Music* which opened on November 18, 1983. The production was an all around hit with the critics, primarily due to the powerful cast which DiChiera had assembled. Providing the star power, Cleo Laine was back to play Desiree, the lead, along with her husband John Dankworth who conducted the production. Ron Raines returned to play Fredrik and in yet another example of DiChiera helping to discover major talent, a young Rebecca Luker was tapped to play Anne. Getting as much mileage as he could from this powerful assemblage of talent, immediately after the Detroit run DiChiera took the production to Dayton to be part of his Dayton Opera season.

"Joan Sutherland brings MOT into the big time." This headline from the June 8, 1984 Free Press captured the response to this historical milestone. Clearly the major event of the season, this production lived up to the tremendous build-up by earning very positive and supportive reviews. A stellar cast which also featured Judith Forst, Kathleen Segal, James Morris and a young Ben Heppner combined with Lofti Mansouri's stage direction and Richard Bonyng's leadership from the podium to create an especially notable first production in the Masonic Temple. Another very successful aspect of this production, the Midwest premiere of surtitles, met with immediate and universal acceptance from the critics and the audience. Excerpts from John Guinn's review in the Free Press:

Fabled Australian soprano Joan Sutherland brought Michigan Opera Theatre into the operatic big time at the Masonic Temple Wednesday night.

The 57-year old Sutherland, essaying the title role in Donizetti's "Anna Bolena" for the first time in her long career, gave ample evidence that her awesome operatic talent is still in excellent condition. The bulk of her singing was immensely satisfying, with confident, often exciting vocalism.

The Surtitles, projections of condensed English translations on a screen above the stage, were highly effective and not in the least distracting. (Guinn, Joan)

The concept of production sharing was in full swing with *Anna Bolena*.

This concept, made a reality by the difficult economic climate, was the wave of the future and *Anna Bolena* was a prime example in that the production was shared by Detroit, Toronto, Houston, San Francisco and

Chicago. The Detroit News also had a glowing review. The following are excerpts:

The magnificent Tudor sets and costumes (designed by John Pascoe and Michael Stennett) and the conducting of Sutherland's husband, Richard Bonyng, were of an international opera house caliber that symbolized the MOT's ambitions to upgrade itself.

Surtitles made their debut with the show, giving Detroit audiences an encounter with a revolutionary translation process that works.

You couldn't have asked for a better supporting cast. Forst has a glorious coloratura and a touching manner as the woman caught between her love for King and Queen. Segar, a local singer and MOT regular, positively blossomed in this heavyweight company. And Morris, settled into some singing of thrilling intensity. As when he plays Don Giovanni, he creates a character of such sexy evil you love to hate him. (Malitz, Super)

This production of *Anna Bolena* also provided a direct comparison to the Met Tour as it was scheduled immediately after the Met Tour left town. In another bit of stellar programming, DiChiera essentially went head to head with the Met and came out a winner, showing that MOT was indeed capable of grand opera production on the same scale as the Met Tour.

The production was such a huge success that it solidified MOT's move to the Masonic Temple for its spring seasons. By the end of the run, the planning and publicity for the next spring was already in place and DiChiera was able to announce a major grand opera production of Verdi's *Aida* starring James McCracken and Leona Mitchell for April 1985.

The move to Masonic Temple was part of MOT's strategic plan. In the fall of 1983 MOT released the details of the long-range strategic planning that set the course for its future. The fundamental goal was to become one of the outstanding opera companies in the United States, serving as a major cultural resource. There were five basic goals. The first was to present the broadest repertory of opera with the highest standards. A major part of this goal included the presentation of grand opera at the Masonic Temple. *Anna Bolena* was the production that launched this series. The Music Hall stage and pit simply could not accommodate the requirements of grand opera.

The second goal was to assure that MOT would continue to make its work accessible to all segments of the population in a variety of ways. MOT was already well-known for its innovative programs. The touring productions and the Opera in Residence were highly successful examples and this goal would insure that MOT would continue to nurture community-based support by reaching out in an effort to connect with the broadest possible constituency.

The third goal was to continue to provide opportunities for emerging talents, both local and national. The list of now famous artists who made their debut or received early starts with MOT is impressive: Kathleen Battle, Rockwell Blake, Maria Ewing, Leona Mitchell, Catherine Malfitano, Victora Vergara, Wilhelmenia Fernandez and Ron Raines, to

name a few. Another example of tending to this goal was the MOT's exemplary Young Artist Apprentice program which encouraged both performers and artists working in management, direction and design.

The fourth goal was to continue MOT's commitment to American works. This was already somewhat of an MOT specialty and the clear intention was to continue this commitment. DiChiera was intent on taking a major role in charting the future for new American opera and musical theatre and his position as President of OPERA America would add considerable weight to his leadership role in this area.

Practically speaking the fifth goal was, of course, the most critical. This was the goal of developing broad-based financial stability. Part of this goal was planning for the development of an Endowment Fund. Increased support from individuals, corporations and foundations had made it so that MOT reached its fund-raising goal for the 1982-83 season. This fact fulfilled the first year requirement for a very crucial \$250,000 Ford Foundation Stabilization Grant. Enthusiasm was high, especially after the *Anna Bolena* experience and MOT was in a period of increasing individual and corporate fund-raising. The Eccentric newspapers reported on the financial state of affairs at the time:

Lynn Townsend, chairman of the MOT board of trustees, officiated at a brief business meeting at the Detroit Athletic Club dinner reception during which treasurer Cameron B. Duncan gave a short financial report. He noted the working capital reserve from 1983

to 1984 went from a negative \$40,000 to more than \$300,000 and cited cuts in expenses of \$40,000, excess of \$80,000 more than expected from state funding and Cleo Laine's box office success in "A Little Night Music" (\$80,000 more than expected) as the reasons for the increase in funds.

The number of subscribers this season reached an all-time high of 5,700. In 1982-83, the number of subscribers was 3,500. It rose 30 percent to 4,300 for the 1983-84 season and another 30 percent this past year. (Doerr, MOT)

The article also reported that Mr. Townsend announced the appointment of fifteen new Trustees, thus adding more financial clout to the Board.

With business going so well, subscriptions on a dramatic rise, increasing foundation and corporate support and an expanding Board of Trustees, MOT's financial picture was solid. Regarding these developments

DiChiera was quoted in the Free Press:

I think whether the Met comes or not, MOT has to position itself to cover the whole spectrum of operatic fare: the experimental, the lighter repertoire, moderate-sized operas, ethnic operas, American operas and large-scale grand operas.

The strategic plan was very important for me, because it said to the board, Here is an opera company that has been here 12 years now. What do you think of it? What is your vision for it?

And indeed what happened was that the board developed a sense of ownership for the company and took the goals – many of which I had felt very strongly about for years – and made them their own.

Now there's an allegiance to a concept, and an understanding that everyone has an identical view of the company. Not that they're etched in stone. But the important thing is it makes me feel like I'm not out there alone. (Guinn, MOT moves)

The board taking "ownership" for the company and the goals was clearly the key. DiChiera was bringing the formative years to a peak on solid financial footing. The financial support along with the obvious enthusiasm in the community were clear indications of DiChiera's success during the first period of the history of Michigan Opera Theatre.

The third key event that marked the end of the formative years was the decision to move the fall season to the Fisher Theatre beginning in the fall of 1985 bringing the Music Hall years to an end. It was also announced that MOT would be moving its administrative offices to a building one block from the Fisher on Second Avenue. This building would not only house the offices but also offered much-needed rehearsal space. The decision to leave the Music Hall was a difficult one, especially considering the sentimental attachment to the company's first home and everything that had taken place in the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. The decision had to be made however, especially considering the financial realities. Ultimately it was a natural evolution considering the momentous growth and the impressive goals laid out for the company by DiChiera and the Board of Directors. The increased number of seats at the Fisher and at the Masonic Temple would mean a dramatic and immediate increase in ticket income for MOT and that fact simply could not be ignored. MOT was working very hard to achieve a

sound fiscal position and this move would be a major step in that direction.

### **A Solid Foundation**

The Detroit Grand Opera Association announced, on April 1, 1985, that it was going to end its sponsorship of the spring Metropolitan Opera Week. The spring 1985 visit would be the last to be presented by the DGOA in Detroit. After twenty-six years, the Met Tour had come to the end of its run. John B. Ford III, DGOA President, was quoted in a press release: "The continually escalating costs of touring the complete company have finally proved prohibitive for the Detroit Market" (Ford, Upcoming). The uncertainty of the Met Tour had been a point of discussion for quite some time. There had been a serious decline in star power as the big names were increasingly deciding not to participate. The only real star in the 1985 Met Tour was Sherrill Milnes. The days of many stars performing in the one-week visit had long since passed. Another major factor in the decline of the tour was that television had developed into a viable way for the Met to reach audiences nationwide with broadcasts of its finest productions. The Met had performed an important role in taking opera to communities with no opera company of their own, but times had most certainly changed. It was clear that the

money it took to finance the Met Tour could be better used by local arts organizations. Mr. Ford hit on this subject in the DGOA Press Release:

The consensus of opinion among our Trustees and our key corporate supporters was that Detroit's opera audience would be better served in the future by a funneling of the community's resources into our local avenues for operatic presentation, organizations such as Michigan Opera Theatre (Ford, Upcoming).

The regional opera movement had taken hold and become the reality. There was a prevailing sense that the Met Tour was holding back the growth of the regional companies. An extensive article in the Detroit News on the subject pointed out that in the Met Tour cities there was consensus that the local companies would be better off with no Met Tour. Martin Feinstein, general director of the Washington Opera was quoted:

What is not healthy is that the Met goes after local funds to help support their visit. In fact, their fund-raising effort came right in the middle of our season last year. That hurts us. In Washington there is no major industry, no city or state to support us. Every dollar they take away from us is a disaster. (Malitz, Dropping)

Lofti Mansouri of the Canadian Opera Company was also quoted on the subject:

For any local company, it's a point of concern when the Met comes for just a few days and walks away with about a million dollars. Look what Michigan Opera Theatre could do with the additional million. They could afford more stars and do grander things like the *Aida* and the *Turandot* they are already planning. (Malitz, Dropping)

DiChiera was quoted in the same article estimating that MOT "could realize as much as \$500,000 in additional gifts if the Met stops coming." That would mean MOT could expand its season and increase the number of productions, thus also creating another dramatic increase in ticket income. The growth, the momentum and the enthusiasm of the regional opera company movement was a fact of life and DiChiera and MOT had taken a leading role in that growth. For Detroit and the other Met Tour cities the end of the Tour meant new opportunities for further serious growth for their own regional companies. With an extensive strategic plan in hand and increasing support, MOT was ready to step in and fill the void. With the end of the Met Tour, MOT was ready to assume the role that it had earned as the operatic resource for greater Detroit and Michigan.

Essentially this first era in the history of MOT, the formative years, could be called the Music Hall years. In these early years, MOT and the Music Hall were linked together and the era came to a close with MOT's final production in the Music Hall in the fall of 1984. After that it was on to the Fisher Theatre and the Masonic Temple and the next era in the history of Michigan Opera Theatre.

"Michigan Opera Theatre is on a roll," was the lead in a Free Press feature about the upcoming season. There was much enthusiasm,

exciting growth and the financial state of affairs was very good. Also from the Free Press feature:

As the company opens its 14<sup>th</sup> season, it finds an increasingly large audience for its offerings, and since June, 1983 it has operated in the black. There was a modest surplus of \$30,000 from last season's \$1.9 million budget, and this year's budget, which is \$2.3 million, is expected to produce a surplus of \$100,000. For the past two years, MOT subscriptions have increased about 30 percent a year, with this year's subscriptions currently standing at more than 5,500. (Guinn, Merry)

Cleo Laine was back to open the fall 1984 season in Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow* on October 12, 1984. With Ron Raines as Danilo, stage direction by Bernard Uzan and Laine's husband John Dankworth on the podium, the production earned mostly good reviews from the critics. The second production, opening on November 2, 1984, was Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. The production had seven performances, four conducted by Gustav Meier and three by Yakov Kreizberg. *The Magic Flute* featured newcomers and veterans in a cast which included Jerome Hines as Sarastro, Carmen Balthrop as Pamina and eleven members of the MOT Young Artist Apprentice program. It was classic MOT, featuring big names along with upcoming talent in a vigorous production which included two performances that were interpreted in American Sign Language for the hearing-impaired. The production won rave reviews from all the critics.

It was fitting that MOT's final production in the Music Hall was Stephen Sondheim's unique music theatre piece *Sweeney Todd*. It opened on November 16, 1984 and was a great example of many things that MOT had come to stand for. MOT was one of the first American opera companies to include *Sweeney Todd* in their repertoire and it was the first time the work was seen in Detroit. It was adventurous programming at its finest and had that mark of extra excitement as DiChiera brought yet another major American work for its Detroit premiere. Conducted by Mark Flint, directed by Mark Montel, and featuring Broadway stars David Cryer and Judy Kaye in the leads, *Sweeney Todd* also included five MOT Young Artists Apprentices, most notably Rebecca Luker, in feature roles. This blend of established and upcoming talent had become an MOT signature. The exciting production generated a great deal of attention in the media and met with rave reviews from all the critics, including being named one of Detroit's Ten Best Plays of the season by the Detroit Free Press. *Sweeney Todd* closed on December 1, 1984. While no one except the upper MOT and Nederlander management knew it at the time, when the final curtain came down, the Music Hall years ended in a blaze of glory, on the wings of a critically acclaimed, aesthetic tour de force. It was indeed a fitting way to end an era.

The growth would continue and the next era, the Masonic/Fisher years would lead to MOT's 1996 gala opening of the Detroit Opera House as the company's permanent home. At the beginning of the Masonic/Fisher years it was clear that it would be a transition period and the fundamental goal would be for MOT to find and purchase a suitable home. As owners of the theatre, MOT would not only have a permanent home but the business and rental possibilities were excellent. The spectacular Detroit Opera House stands as a testament to DiChiera and all MOT supporters who believed and invested in the dream. It is a beautiful theatre, the result of a complete restoration to its original Italian renaissance splendor, with excellent acoustics thanks to the genius of legendary theatre architect C. Howard Crain and a completely new ten thousand square foot stage house comparable to any in the world.

The key element in establishing an arts organization is developing a solid relationship between artist and audience. While a theatre, a physical home, is important it is the bond between artist and community which is critical and if that relationship is strong there is something on which to build. During the formative years in the history of Michigan Opera Theatre DiChiera formed a strong bond with his community, establishing deep roots, forging a relationship that was solid. The result is that at this writing MOT is thriving in their own beautiful, world-class opera house as the tenth largest opera company in the United States.

Noted Detroit Free Press theatre critic Lawrence DeVine once described what he called the "great man in history theory" in which "one great figure will come along and cause something to happen. A mover. Somebody to get things going" (Boggs, History). DiChiera was just such a man. The fundamental achievement of the formative years was that DiChiera was able to build a solid relationship with his community and his supporters and establish a full-time professional regional opera company for Detroit and Michigan.

DiChiera was described in the Free Press on the occasion of the five-year anniversary of the opening of the Detroit Opera House: "DiChiera is one of the last larger-than-life impresarios in American opera, a benign dictator combining impeccable artistic taste with Svengali-like business and marketing instincts" (Stryker, Second). The article fairly puts DiChiera in the company of Kurt Herbert Adler, San Francisco Opera 1953 to 1981, Andis Krainik, Lyric Opera of Chicago 1981-1996 and Glynn Ross, Seattle Opera 1964-1983. Actually DiChiera outranks his esteemed colleagues in a career at MOT lasting almost forty years.

The history of how Michigan Opera Theatre came into being serves as an example of the kind of dedicated effort and inspired leadership that is required to build an arts institution. The philosophies, ideas and strategies that DiChiera put into motion during the formative years became a model of audience-building technique. MOT developed an

identity on which to build and establish broad grass roots and community-based support and has been exemplary in regards to outreach. Without success in the area of developing a solid connection to the widest possible community there would be no opera company. Under the dedicated, expert leadership of Karen DiChiera, MOT's education and outreach programs are one of the fundamental strengths of the company. These programs provide the foundation for an opera company which is establishing deep roots in the community and creating an atmosphere for opera in greater metropolitan Detroit and Michigan.

The highest artistic standards were established from the beginning and the community knew it could expect the finest professional work. There was a dedication to adventurous and diverse programming covering the full range of opera and music theatre, pairing traditional with contemporary opera. Programming included a major emphasis on American composers, the presentation of musical theatre works and a series of lesser known nationalistic operas outside the Italian, French and German mainstream which appealed to unique segments of the community. It was a wide ranging repertory of music theatre in the broadest sense of the term including opera, operetta, musicals, traditional grand opera, an international mix of composers appealing to the widest possible audience featuring just the right amount of star power and a

healthy measure of new works and premieres. DiChiera made MOT an excellent example of diversity in programming for the lyric stage.

In casting there was a major commitment to featuring a mix of well-established artists with up-and-coming talents. DiChiera was committed to developing young artists and his record regarding opportunities for young up-and-coming talent is exemplary. He also displayed an uncanny ability to create a special excitement by featuring artists with recognized star power, something which has always been important in opera. The combination of star power and emerging talent was one of MOT's specialties. MOT's successful Young Artists Apprentice program is yet another example of the dedication to developing young talent and giving it a chance to perform and grow. Over the years DiChiera achieved a well-deserved excellent reputation for bringing consistently exciting talent to his audience.

DiChiera succeeded completely in establishing a full-time regional opera company. In a larger socio-economic context, he also made a truly significant contribution to the greater Detroit metropolitan community in establishing the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. In establishing a Performing Arts Center, DiChiera did what many thought was impossible. He brought Detroiters back downtown, at night, in increasing numbers and earned excellent reviews along the way. In so doing he made a critical contribution to the cultural identity of the city. History

shows that in the fall of 1971, at the Music Hall, DiChiera and his young opera company planted the seed that resulted in the rebirth of the theatre and entertainment district in Detroit, a district which at the turn of the twenty-first century was one of the biggest in the nation. Beyond the theatre and entertainment district in an even larger context, DiChiera's efforts during the Music Hall years were an important and significant contribution to the renaissance of the greater city in general. It was a classic example of citizen initiative working through private enterprise. DiChiera's incredible individual vision, fierce dedication, sense of artistry and unparalleled leadership led to the establishment of a nationally recognized opera company and a major contribution to the rebirth of a city. For David DiChiera and Michigan Opera Theatre it was indeed a triumph of and for regional opera.

## APPENDIX

### A Chronological List of Productions including Conductors and Directors Produced by Overture to Opera and Michigan Opera Theatre 1964-1984

**1964 Season - Overture to Opera III** – January 29, February 3, 7, 18, 21, 26, March 3, 8, 17, April 3, 8, 11, 1964

A program of scenes: *Aida, Don Giovanni, La Boheme, Faust*

Stage Director - Christopher Flynn

Accompanist - Lawrence La Gore

**1965 Season - Overture to Opera IV** – February 8, 9, 14, 17, 21, 24, 28, March 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 17, 22, 26, 29, 1965

A Program of scenes: *Madame Butterfly, Tosca, Samson and Delilah, Otello, Susannah, Rigoletto*

Stage Director - John Gregory

Accompanist - Lawrence La Gore

**1966 Season - Overture to Opera V** - February 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 27, March 1, 6, 10, 11, 15, 29, April 2, 1966

A Program of scenes: *The Marriage of Figaro, Lucia di Lammermoor, Der Rosenkavalier, Faust*

Stage Directors - J. Michael Bloom and William Cole

Accompanist - Lawrence LaGore

**1967 Season - Overture to Opera VI** - February 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 21, 24, 26 March 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 12, 14, 17, 29, 1967

Accompanists – Lawrence LaGore and Naomi Amos

*The Portuguese Inn* - Cherubini - Michigan Premiere

Note: first full length one act opera for OTO.

Stage Director - John Broome

*A Masked Ball* - Verdi

Stage Director – J. Michael Bloom

*The Consul* - Menotti

Stage Director – J. Michael Bloom

**1968 Season - Overture to Opera VII – March 10, 15, 27, April 3, 6, 27,  
March 13, 15, 18, 26, 29, April 3, 9, 10, 11, 18, 22, 29, May 2, 1968  
Accompanist - Naomi Amos**

*The Medium* - Menotti  
Stage Director – John Broome

*The Portuguese Inn* - Cherubini - a revival of 1966 Production  
Stage Director – John Broome

**Note: The March 26 student matinee and March 27 evening  
performances were accompanied by members of the Detroit Symphony  
Orchestra, directed by William C. Byrd**

*LaBoheme* - Puccini  
Stage Director - J. Michael Bloom

**1969 Season - Overture to Opera 1969 – February 9, 28, March 10, 15,  
22, 1969 -The first year with no scenes.  
Accompanist - Naomi Amos and John Landis**

*Der Jasager* - Brecht/Weill  
Stage Director - John Broome

*Il Campanello* - Donizetti  
Stage Director - Robert Cowden

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* - Menotti - December 13, 18, 1969  
December 13 performance part of the DSO's Young People's Concerts  
Stage Director - Robert Cowden

**Overture to Opera 1970 Season – Tour performances  
December 6-23, 1970**

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* - Menotti  
Stage Director - Thomas Aston  
Piano - David Syme  
Oboe - Thomas Sklut

*The Barber of Seville* –Rossini - April 3, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 1970

Stage Director - Italo Tajo

Music Director - William C. Byrd

**1971 Season - Overture to Opera 1971** – February 23, 26, March 21, 27, 29, April 3, 6, 7, 22, 29, 30, May 5, 6, 8, 13, 1971

Accompanists - David Syme and Walter Cory

*Help, Help, The Globolinks* - Gian-Carlo Menotti - Michigan Premiere

Stage Director - John Reid Klein

Music Director – William C. Byrd

*Rita* - Gaetano Donizetti

Stage Director - J. Michael Bloom

Music Director – William C. Byrd

**A Program of Scenes:**

*Werther* - Jules Massenet from Act III

Stage Director - J. Michael Bloom

*Carmen* - Bizet - from Act II and Act IV

Stage Director - Thomas Aston

*Aida* - Verdi - Act IV, Scene 1

Stage Director - J. Michael Bloom

*La Perichole* - Offenbach - Act III, Scene 1

Stage Director - Roger Thurgaland

*A Soldier's Tale (L'Histoire du Soldat)* - Stravinsky

Stage Director – David DiChiera

Conductor - Pierre Hétu with DSO

**Overture to Opera 1971-72**

*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* - Webber, Rice

November 4, 5, 6, 1971

Stage Director - David DiChiera

Conductor - Robert Resseger

*La Rondine* – Puccini - November 18, 19, 20, 1971

Stage Director - Carolyn Lockwood

Conductor - William Byrd

*The Perfect Fool* – Holst - Two performances February 26, 1972

Stage Director – Thomas A. Aston

Conductor - Pierre Hétu with DSO

**1972 Fall Season - Overture to Opera 1972** - in the Music Hall Theatre

Orchestra - The Flint Symphony Orchestra

*Così fan tutte* - Mozart - September 28, 30 & October 6, 7, 1972

Stage Director - J. Michael Bloom

Conductor - William C. Byrd

*Tosca* - Puccini - October 21, 27, 28 & November 2, 4, 14, 1972

Stage Director - Carolyn Lockwood

Conductor - William C. Byrd and Pierre Hétu

*The Telephone & The Medium* - Menotti - December 7, 9, 15, 16, 1972

*The Telephone*

Stage Director - Hal Youngblood

Conductor - William C. Byrd

*The Medium*

Stage Director - Sal Mineo

Conductor - William C. Byrd

*Beauty and The Beast* - Giannini - January 6, 1973

Stage Director - Steven A. Bleeke

Accompanist - Beverly Labuta

**1973-74 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

Orchestra - The Flint Symphony Orchestra

*Rigoletto* - Verdi - October 6, 10 (Matinee), 12, 13

Stage Director - Tito Serebrinsky

Conductor - Roger Melone

*Madame Butterfly* - Puccini - November 2, 7 (Matinee), 9, 10

Stage Director - Tsutomu Masuko

Conductor - William C. Byrd

*The Merry Widow* - Lehar - January 18, 23 (Matinee), 25, 26  
 Stage Director and Choreographer - Lois Bewley  
 Conductor - William Byrd and Victor Feldbril

**1974-75 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

*La Traviata* – Verdi - October 4, 6, 9, 11, 12, 1974  
 Stage Director - Roy Lazarus  
 Conductor - Dennis Burkh

*Boris Godunov* – Mussorgsky - November 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 1974  
 Stage Director - Frank Rizzo  
 Conductor - Melvin Strauss

*The Elixir of Love* – Donizetti - January 17, 19, 22, 24, 25, 1975  
 Stage Director - James DeBlasis  
 Conductor - Jonathan Dudley

*Die Fledermaus* – Strauss -February 21, 23, 26, 28 and March 1, 1975  
 Stage Director - David Bamberger  
 Conductor - Thomas Booth

**1975-76 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

*Porgy and Bess* – Gershwin - October 3 through 11, 1975  
 Stage Director - Ella Gerber  
 Conductor - Remi Ghilospi

*La Boheme* – Puccini - November 7, 9, 12, 14, 15, 1975  
 Stage Director - Francis Rizzo  
 Conductor - Joseph Carmen De Rugerriis

*Lucia di Lammermoor* – Donizetti – January 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 1976  
 Stage Director – David Alden  
 Conductor – Andrew Meltzer

*The Barber of Seville* – Rossini – February 6, 8, 11, 13, 14, 1976  
 Stage Director – Italo Tajo  
 Conductor – Richard Kapp

### **1976-77 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

*Washington Square* – Pasatieri - World Premiere Production

October 1, 3, 6, 8, 9, 1976

Stage Director - Nikos Psacharopoulos

Conductor - Henry Holt

*Madame Butterfly* – Puccini - November 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 1976

Stage Director - Louis Galterio

Conductor - Yoshimi Takeda

*Naughty Marietta* – Herbert - New Production - January 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 1977

Stage Director - Dominic Missimi

Conductor - Randolph Mauldin

*The Magic Flute* – Mozart - New Production - February 11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 1977

Stage Director – Rhoda Levine

Conductor - John Covelli

### **1977-78 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

*Regina* – Blitzstein - New Production - September 30, October 2, 5, 7, 8, 1977

Stage Director – Francis Rizzo

Conductor – John Yaffe

*Carmen* – Bizet - October 28, 30, November 2, 4, 5, 1977

Stage Director – Dominic Missimi

Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Amahl and the Night Visitors* – Menotti – December 15, 16, 17, 18, 1977

Stage Director – Preston L. Terry

Conductors – Mark D. Flint and Steven Glenn

*The Student Prince* – Romberg - January 20, 22, 25, 27, 28, 1978

Stage Director - Tad Tadlock

Conductor - Mark D. Flint

*Faust* – Gounod - A New Production - February 10, 12, 15, 17, 18, 1978  
 Stage Director – David Alden  
 Conductor – David Effron

**1978-79 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*The Tender Land* – Copland – (Midland) - June 3, 9, 11, 1978  
 Stage Director – Michael Montel  
 Conductor – Aaron Copland

*Madama Butterfly* –Puccini - (Midland) - June 10, 16, 18, 1978  
 Stage Director – Jean-Bernard Bucky  
 Conductor – G. Richard Ryan

*The Pearl Fishers* –Bizet -A New Production  
 September 29, October 1, 4, 6, 7, 1978  
 Stage Director - Dominic Missimi  
 Conductor - Mark D. Flint

*Show Boat* – Kern - October 27, 29, November 1, 3, 4, 1978  
 Stage Director - Frank Egan  
 Conductor - Mark D. Flint

*La Traviata* – Verdi - January 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 1979  
 Stage Director - Christopher Alden  
 Conductor - Randolph Behr

*I Pagliacci* – Leoncavallo - A New Production - February 9, 11, 14, 16, 17, 1979  
 Stage Director - Rhoda Levine  
 Conductor - David Daniels

*The Emperor Jones* – Gruenberg - A New Production  
 February 9, 11, 14, 16, 17, 1979  
 Stage Director - Rhoda Levine  
 Conductor - Robert Willoughy Jones

### **1979 Fall Season - Michigan Opera Theatre at the Music Hall**

*The Most Happy Fella* – Loesser

September 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 1979

Stage Director - Jack O'Brien

Music Director – Andrew Meltzer

*IL Trovatore* – Verdi - September 24, 29 (Italian) September 26, 28, 30 (English)

Stage Director - Sarah Ventura

Conductor - W. Anthony Waters

*La Boheme* – Puccini - October 8, 13 (Italian) October 10, 12, 14 (English)

Stage Director - David Alden

Conductor - Mark D. Flint

*Joan Of Arc* – Tchaikovsky - October 22, 24, 26, 27, 28, 1979

Stage Director - Michael Montel

Conductor - Mark D. Flint

### **1980 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*The Pearl Fishers* – Bizet –Midland – June 18 and 21, 1980

Stage Director – Dominic Missimi

Conductor *Die Fledermaus* – Strauss – September 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 1980

Stage Director – Dominic Missimi

Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Of Mice and Men* – September 26, 28, October 3, 4, 1980

Stage Director – Carlisle Floyd

Conductor – John Demain

*Don Giovanni* – October 10, 12, 15, 17, 18, 1980

Stage Director – Italo Tajo

Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Rigoletto* – Verdi – October 24, 26, 29, 31, November 1, 1980

Stage Director – Rhoda Levine

Conductor – Willie Anthony Waters

*Fidelio* – Beethoven –(with DSO) – April 9 and 11, 1981  
 Stage Director – Sarah Ventura  
 Conductor – Antal Dorati

**1981 - 1982 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*Tosca* – Puccini – October 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 1981  
 Stage Director – Sarah Ventura  
 Conductor – Willie Anthony Waters

*Carmen* – Bizet – October 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 1981  
 Stage Director – Patrick Bakman  
 Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Anoush* - Tigranian – October 30, 31, November 4, 6, 7, 1981  
 Stage Director – Gerard Papasian  
 Conductor – Raffi Armenian

*The Mikado* – Gilbert and Sullivan – January 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 1982  
 Stage Director – Dorothy Danner  
 Conductor – Glen Clugston

*Porgy and Bess* – Gershwin – January 29, 30, 31 February 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 1982  
 Stage Director – Louis Johnson  
 Conductor – Randolph Mauldin

**1982 - 1983 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*The Haunted Castle* – Moniuszkio -American Premiere – October 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 1982  
 Stage Director – Wojciech Haik  
 Conductor – Janek Kasprzyk

*Lucia di Lammermoor* – Donizetti – October 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 23, 1982  
 Stage Director – Franco Gratale  
 Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Treemonisha* – Joplin – November 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 1982  
 Stage Director – Mabel Robinson  
 Conductor – Tania Leon

*The Marriage of Figaro* – Mozart – January 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 1983  
 Stage Director – Christopher Alden  
 Conductor – Dennis Burkh

*The Sound of Music* – Rodgers and Hammerstein – January 28 –  
 February 5, 1983  
 Stage Director – Michael Montel  
 Conductor – Dick Paronella

**1983 - 1984 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*La Traviata* – Verdi – October 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 1983  
 Stage Director –  
 Conductor – Mark D. Flint

*Faust* – Gounod – November 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 1983  
 Stage Director – Bernard Uzan  
 Conductor – Willie A. Waters

*A Little Night Music* – November 18-26, 1983  
 Stage Director – John Calvert  
 Conductor – John Dankworth

*Anna Bolena* – Donizetti – June 6 and 9, 1984  
 Stage Director – Lofti Mansouri  
 Conductor – Richard Bonyngue

**1984 - 1985 Season - Michigan Opera Theatre**

*The Merry Widow* – Lehar – October 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 20, 1984  
 Stage Director – Bernard Uzan  
 Conductor – John Dankworth

*The Magic Flute* – Mozart – November 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 1984  
 Stage Director – William Farlow  
 Conductor – Gustav Meier

*Sweeney Todd* – Sondheim – November 16, 17, 18, 23, 24, 25, 28, 29,  
 December 1, 1984  
 Stage Director – Michael Montel  
 Conductor – Mark D. Flint

***Aida* – Verdi – April 18 and 20, 1985**  
**Stage Director – Anne Ewers**  
**Conductor – Mark D. Flint**

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**ABSTRACT****THE HISTORY OF MICHIGAN OPERA THEATRE  
THE FORMATIVE YEARS  
1963-1985****by****TIMOTHY PAUL LENTZ****December 2001****Adviser: Dr. Blair V. Anderson****Major: Theatre****Degree: Doctor of Philosophy**

**This study traces the history and development of Michigan Opera Theatre, a professional regional opera company in Detroit, Michigan. It covers the period from 1963 to 1985 and chronicles the strategies, philosophies, programming policies and practices of Michigan Opera Theatre in its formative years.**

**Primary sources for the study include reviews, press releases, programs and administrative documents such as Michigan Opera Theatre's long-range plans. In addition a large part of the research for this dissertation is comprised of personal interviews with founding members, current and past administrative and artistic staff of Michigan Opera Theatre.**

Chapter One of this dissertation provides a background of the opera scene in Detroit prior to 1961 as well as biographical information concerning David DiChiera, the founder of Michigan Opera Theatre.

Chapter Two traces the years when the company was known as Overture to Opera and Chapter Three describes the expanding scope of Overture to Opera activities. It was during this period that the philosophies and strategies for building a regional opera company would take shape.

Chapter Four chronicles the beginning of the Music Hall years. It was during this time that the company became a member of OPERA America, changed its name to Michigan Opera Theatre and also founded the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts.

Chapter Five finds the company establishing deep roots in the community. It also discusses the department of community programs founded by Karen DiChiera. Chapter Six, by way of conclusion summarizes the status of Michigan Opera Theatre at the end of the formative years.

This dissertation offers a detailed examination of what must be done in order to build a world-class arts institution. The work provides a detailed study of the creation of a major regional opera company. It also surveys the positive effect this had on the community and proposes that David DiChiera and Michigan Opera Theatre, in the fall of 1971 at the Music Hall, ignited a spark that resulted in one of the largest theatre and entertainment districts in America.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Tim Lentz has taught in Rochester Community Schools for twenty-nine years and is in his twenty-fourth year as Vocal Music Director/Theatre Coordinator at Adams High School. He received his BS in Mechanical Engineering at Michigan State University, his secondary certificate in Math at Wayne State, and a certification in Music at Oakland University. He received his MA in Theatre at Wayne State University in 1991. While at Wayne State he directed *Bye, Bye, Birdie* at the Bonstelle Theatre, *The Cocktail Hour* in the Studio Theatre and was assistant director for the Hilberry Theatre productions of *Romeo & Juliet* and *The Heidi Chronicles*.

Tim has been active in Dinner Theatre in the Detroit area and was bass soloist at Meadowbrook Congregational Church in Novi for fifteen years. He was selected as a State Finalist for the 1982 Michigan Teacher of the Year and has been listed in *Who's Who Among America's Teachers* three times. Tim is currently Michigan Opera Theatre's archivist and historian.

Tim has directed forty-eight major musicals as director of the Adams High School annual musical and Rochester's Summer Music Theatre. He has also technical directed or produced over forty non-musical productions with Rochester Community Schools. Tim and the Adams Vocal Music Department have been very active in the Michigan School Vocal Music Association (MSVMA). He was supervisor of the State Solo & Ensemble Festival for two years and served on MSVMA's executive board as Treasurer for eighteen years. His ensembles and choirs have consistently received top ratings at festivals and he is especially proud of the high level of participation at solo and ensemble festivals and in the Honors Choir program. His Men's Ensemble has performed at Ensemble Finals, he has placed soloists in the Youth Arts Solo Finals eight times and he has twice led workshops on musical theatre at MSVMA's annual choral directors conference.